Elim

A Novel

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ELIM

Where did all the sages get the idea that a man's desires must be normal and virtuous?

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Notes from Underground

PART ONE

1

When I dream I dream of her.

I dream of searching for her on an arid plain, of visiting my eye on the line of a threaded horizon, trying to pick her from the sparse brush dotted to the landscape. She moves like the sail of a skiff, wavering, almost motionless.

I then follow her at a distance down a slope covered in grass. The grass takes her up to her knees. I follow her down to an empty riverbed which is covered in boulders. Between the boulders, in the scoops of the bedrock, there are pools of tepid water. The sweat drips into my eyes so that my vision becomes distorted.

When I reach her she is wearing a white frock which becomes a blur. It fuses into the sea of red dots that must once have been flowers. The sky is glazed blue. I find her naked, her skin is sickly, a pale white. She sits on her frock, on a bed of grass, and with her are two men. They sit beside her, off the edge of the frock, dressed in black slacks and black overcoats. They wear finely manicured beards. They seem to be speaking to her, but she ignores them. She is staring at me, smiling.

I wake on soiled sheets in a bamboo room on the Pacific Coast of Mexico to brutal heat and brutal humidity. I move about restlessly on the bed, her skin brushing against mine. Her breast catches the hair on my arm as she turns towards me. She lays her arm and her breast across my chest.

'Jason,' she whispers.

If I say nothing, if I make no sudden movements, but merely turn half away, then I will be able not to speak. A headache begins and I can taste the bile come up from my stomach. Her arm and breast are pressed against my chest. I turn to her as if just waking and I smile. She asks how I slept. We talk about the bus trip down from Oaxaca, about the great dry sierra through which we had passed, about the chain gang we had seen that had been hauled off the bus as we had gone by the station, their faces mute and ashen, their legs trapped by the left ankle, their grey dusty clothes hanging off them; the wooden seats, the metal bars to which we had clutched, the fat mestizo man and his straw sombrero.

She says that we should stay in Puerto Escondido for at least a week.

She says: 'You were very restless last night, talking in your sleep.'

I say nothing. She runs her fingers down the length of my arm.

'Were you dreaming?' she asks.

I turn towards her, leaning against my side. I think I hear her voice, perhaps she is asking the question again. She is lying on her side, facing me. I pull the sheet off her shoulder and then run my hand across her arm.

We are both drenched with sweat but we shuffle closer together so that much of our flesh is touching. We begin to kiss. I press her up against me so that her breasts push against my chest. She says something, but it does not register. I run my hand over her thigh, across her side, across her belly.

She closes herself in. She pulls herself slightly away, then turns from her side onto her back. I continue to touch her. She touches my hand, stops it, then pushes it away. She turns her back to me.

'It's too hot,' she says. After a moment her voice again: 'What is the matter, Jason?'

I look away from her, then sit up in the bed.

I sit at the edge of the bed, facing the wall. With my hands resting on my knees, I turn my head against the axis of my shoulders. I feel a sinuous pull in my neck as I twist my head in a circle over my shoulders. I stretch my arms out to feel the blades in my back tighten my skin.

She gets out of the bed and avoids my eyes. She goes to the shower, struggles with the tap, then stands under the crude spout. The tiles over which the brown water runs are stained and cracked. I watch her shape behind the shower-curtain as she rubs soap across her body. I watch the movements of her body, her thighs, her breasts, her head of black hair held tightly forward. The cold water flows across her shoulders, down her smooth, firm back.

Mechanically I turn away. I go out to the balcony, lean against it, and stare at the empty blue sky. I wait for her to dry herself, to get dressed. I smile at her when she says she will meet me in the restaurant for breakfast. She asks if I am alright, if there is anything the matter.

At a table on the terrace facing the bay, I find her staring at the ocean. Several boats painted in bright colours bob up and down on the swell. Tourists have already begun to emerge onto the beach, their paleness glowing white under the sun.

She touches my leg, but continues staring out. I hold her hand and we sit silently while the waiter arrives and begins to set the table. Behind him the television suddenly blares with noise from the interior of the restaurant.

'Los Estados Unidos y Colombia,' he tells us, then continues pensively, 'Pienso Colombia van ganar.'

His look darts back to the interior as there is a piercing rise in the commentator's voice. For a second he stands with his head cocked to the side and then he drops his gaze to the floor.

Catherine grabs my hand and points to the pelicans that have begun floating around the boats. They go up and down with the tug of the swell and pick at the sea, as if they were picking at a surface of blue jelly, a surface to which they are stuck, pulling the flesh from it.

We eat quietly through breakfast. At some point she says that her eggs are glassy and I look up at her and smile and I tell her that that is because the hens here are different. They peck at the scales and bones of dead fish, they scavenge through the piles of rubbish that litter the harbour, they are caught by small boys who themselves are undernourished.

Later we go up the stairs to our room and I follow her smooth calves as she goes up ahead of me and when we get to our room I pull her dress over her shoulders and I take her from behind and enter her and she cries when it is over. She says that she loves me as I caress her hair, as I fall into a dreamless sleep.

I pay a man twenty pesos to take me fishing. We set off from the beach in his skiff which he motors out of the bay with a ten-horsepower engine. We anchor off the rocks that cut off the beach on its western edge and he tackles a line for me on a makeshift rod and weights it with the broken end of a spoon. I drop the line off the edge of the boat. The skiff rocks unevenly on the sea and I stare at its surface, at the way that the shades of blue swim within it.

The guide sits in the bow of the skiff with his arm draped over the engine and stares sullenly back at me.

'Tienes niños?' I ask him eventually.

'Si señor,' he says, then pulls at the bucket of tackle in the middle of the skiff and looks down into it.

I wait to see what he will do next, but he simply lets go the bucket and sits back again.

'Cuanto años vive en Puerto Escondido?' I ask.

'Mas o menos quince.'

'Es muy bonita aqui,' I tell him.

'Si señor,' he says, cocking his head to the side and spitting into the sea.

We catch nothing. At some point there is a tug and the line rises at an angle off the sea, beads of water springing off, the guide standing up to see what is beneath us, but soon the line goes slack and he sits down and shrugs at me.

'No hay muchas pescados,' he says simply.

I stare at the edge of the coastline, at the rocky point, then the wide berth of the beach, our hotel, the restaurants under the palapas, then the sand road out to the east and the breakers that come in sets onto the steep sand shelf. Further out to the east I look to see the farthest point of the coast before it curves towards the south and I imagine it going on towards Guatemala and El Salvador.

I turn to the guide and ask him if he has ever caught a Marlin.

'Que?' he says.

I say to him, 'Marlin,' and stretch out my arms and show the height of the dorsal fin but he only shrugs back at me.

I imagine this: being out on this skiff for days on end, rocking with the motions of the Pacific, watching my skin turn to paper.

We return to the beach with the last of the sun. He takes the rod from my hand after we have pulled the skiff in bursts from the edge of the water and he says to me, 'Hay fiesta esta noche. Para los politicos, PAN. Esta es muy fuerte aqui.'

I wait for him to go on, for some explanation, but his expression remains inscrutable. I watch him trudge off across the beach.

I find Catherine asleep in the bed in our room and she wakes when I hover over her and I kiss her on her neck. She pulls her arms around me and whispers in my ear and says that I smell of fish.

'Only the tackle and the bait,' I tell her, and she smiles and says there will always be another day.

'Today is the day of waiting,' I say.

After I shower and dress I stand on the balcony while Catherine showers, looking out across the coast where coloured lights illuminate patches of the beach in front of the palapas.

2

We ask the proprietor of the hotel about the fiesta. He seems surprised that we know about it, but tells us that it is outside of the village, out across Zicatela. He says that it is for the PAN party. He says that it is alright because they will lose the elections anyway.

'But go if you wish,' he says.

Outside the air is warm as we take the main cobbled road through the town, going past the Spanish-style houses with their barred windows and past the restaurants and bars from which salsa music blares. At the end of the road we ask a taxi driver how far it is to Zicatela. He leans back onto his vehicle, seeming to size us up and then points out into the darkness.

'Veinte pesos,' he says.

'No,' I say. 'How far, not how much.'

'Veinte pesos,' he repeats.

I look carefully at him, at his round mestizo face and his brown eyes and the belly that protrudes over his belt and what I want to do is to take him out onto the empty beach and to trip him so that his bulk would fall upon the sand. I would then pierce his belly with a knife, it would be like piercing a bloated sheep, and I would twist the knife to find his organs. But Catherine takes my hand and I can feel her squeeze it as if to say that it will be ok and soon we are walking out across the beach under the rising moon.

She squeezes my hand again and I look at her, for she is the one who is facing the moonlight, and I look at the smooth skin of her face, white as death, at her lips as they move, and for a second I am terrified that I cannot hear a word she is saying, that I can only watch her mouth the words, and suddenly I stop and breathe quietly and long to myself and let go her hand. I can feel cold sweat blister across my forehead and then I can hear again.

She asks me what is the matter and I turn to her and shrug as she looks at me strangely. From out of the darkness we hear dogs bark. They seem to be loping through the darkness and then a domestic voice intrudes in Spanish, calling them back. I look up into the sky and see that the moon has disappeared behind cloud and I whisper to her that it is dark and she clutches me close to her, her breath moving across the skin of my neck. We go on in the darkness, navigating by the

rustling of the sea against the coast and we follow the breakers until the moon again emerges.

Finally we make for the rock outcrop that separates Zicatela from the bay, its craggy outline cutting a darker shade of black against the sky. From there we take the sand road that hugs the coast and begin to hear music once again. She asks me if anything is the matter and this time I tell her that I am fine and for a while it seems that everything is fine. Fireflies light up from the surface of the road like slow-moving shooting stars and the music comes through the sound of the ocean like a rumour.

We find a small white house off the edge of the beach. Over its walls are draped the green and white colours of the PAN political party, and below, under a palm-frond roof that must shade during the day an open patch of sand, several men and women, mostly Mexican, stand and drink. Everything is lit by a bright naked bulb that makes the faces of the people white and dead.

As we enter the house, I turn to Catherine and say to her, 'The colour of death is white.' But she seems not to hear me.

The music is a Spanish love song that she knows and she begins singing along with it under her breath. I watch her lips move and for a moment she is beautiful with dead lips.

A middle-aged Mexican man comes over to us and welcomes us to his house. He says to us that we are welcome to join his fiesta and that he is happy that we have come here to support his party.

'The government,' he says. 'It is time for them to leave. Ellos son putas,' he spits.

Again he pumps my hand and then moves off to a table. We stand at the edge of the fiesta and watch while the men stand around a make-shift wooden bar drinking cervezas and at some of the tables, which are propped lopsidedly in the sand, there are a few other gringos. Some pamphlets are given out about the PAN party and we take them and then watch as the owner begins to speak. The music is turned down and we stare at him as he makes his speech in a rapid Spanish. At times he becomes suddenly impassioned and a few voices join his and then the music is turned back on and people go back to their drinks.

I stare at the ground as Catherine puts her arm around me I feel the heat of the naked bulb and the stares of the locals on us as we lean against the back wall of the house.

A young man with a face of stubble approaches us and before speaking seems to sway before us, smiling.

'Where are you from?' he finally asks.

'South Africa,' Catherine says.

He pauses for a second, appearing blank, as if the answer were no matter.

'Como te llamas?' he asks, looking at Catherine.

'Catherine,' she tells him. 'Y Jason.'

'Mucho gusto,' he says.

Again he stands before us for a moment digesting her words and then smiles suddenly and says that we should sit with him at his table. 'Con me jefe,' he says.

We are introduced to two other mestizo men and one younger man who seems to be the jefe. The one with stubble, the borracho, goes to the bar to get our drinks and the younger man, whose skin is beautifully smooth, leans towards us and says his name is Jesus.

'Con mucho gusto,' he says, shaking our hands. 'I say sorry, for Miguel is drunk, but we are glad you join us.'

He notices the pamphlet I have in my hand. **'You vote PAN?'** he says, and laughs briefly. 'For you this is strange, no? This fiesta?'

'It is interesting,' Catherine says. 'Where are you from?'

'You can see I am not Mexican,' he laughs. 'I come from Cuba. I work here in Puerto Escondido. Playing music. I open a bar in one of the hotels.'

As he speaks I feel a sharp pain in the back of my neck and I begin rubbing my neck, kneading out the pain and I watch his lips as they move under the canvas of his smooth skin. I feel Catherine's hand on my leg as we drink the cervezas and I sit listening for she has asked him why he has come to Puerto Escondido.

'You know Puerto Escondido?' he asks. 'It is called the hidden port. It is the place where I come to hide.'

Later we are drunk and we dance under the stars with the sand under our feet and the air warm around us and finally the pain has gone from my neck. I feel Catherine close against me and my erection under the fabric of my jeans and what I desire is to take her down to the edge of the shore, to where the shelf of the coast tilts into the ocean and to fuck her under the half moon under the stars against the rough sand against the earth.

I feel her pull away from me and then I am swaying high above the earth until there is a hand on my shoulder and I turn to see the smooth face of the Cuban. He takes me to a table where we sit down and I catch a glimpse of Catherine sitting at a stool at the bar and then the Cuban says to me that my woman is very beautiful.

'Muy bonita. Muy guapa.'

'Si,' I say through my arms, for I am lying against the wood of the table.

'You are married?' he asks.

'Si,' I say and then I shake with laughter and pull my arms away from the table, leaning back in the chair with my head tilted back toward the palm roof of the palapa.

Then he says, motioning with his hand, 'Quieres fumar?'

'Si,' I respond.

He smiles brightly and takes me by the arm and he calls out to the borracho. As I stand I look again for Catherine and see her at the wooden bar and she too smiles back at me but now it is as if she is only an image that I have conjured up from the past, that memory has tricked me and has made her appear before me as a phantom of regret – the way one winces at memory. I imagine that if I were to call out her name she would not hear me; if I were to reach for her I would not be able to touch her.

I walk with them, with Jesus and Miguel, out of the cone of illumination of the bulb, out towards the sound of the ocean.

'It is better this way,' he says. 'We get caught, it is ok. We pay mordida, but it is better not to pay, no?'

Just off the shelf, against which the sea rushes in a white translucent sheet under the face of the moon, we sit down heavily in the sand and I watch as Jesus lights up the marijuana. He draws on it through a gap he constructs between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand and cups that hand with his right in which the joint is wedged. I watch him draw three breaths then take it in. He passes it to Miguel who does the same and then I draw on the loosely held paper and take in the burning into my lungs. I hold it into me for a time, then release the smoke through my mouth. It is quiet between us as we sit on the sand shelf and listen to the waves.

I wait for it and soon it begins to come over me, insidiously. The feeling slides through my body like an eel. I imagine my spine fixed to the earth and the rest of my body a sack of liquid and organs, pinned. The words that Miguel and Jesus speak between themselves slowly move farther and farther away. I turn my head suddenly to make sure they are still there and they look back at me, surprised.

'Que tal?' Jesus says from far away.

'What?'

'What is the matter with you? Are you ill?'

'No. I am fine,' I whisper to myself. I stare down at the sand and say again, 'I am fine.'

Miguel comes across my vision and leans towards me. He laughs at me.

'No t'clabas,' he says.

I look into his face and move my head away from it. I force myself to say, 'No entiendo.'

'What you not understand?' Miguel says.

'Clabas.'

'Ah. It means not to be stuck. Like a fly.'

They go then, or perhaps it is later. Perhaps we speak for a while, watching the wash of surf as it clings less to the beach. Perhaps I say nothing and it is them that speak, in a Spanish that I understand only intermittently. Perhaps I force

them to go, telling them that I need to lie against the sand, that the air is warm, that I am tired. I sleep then, but I dream.

First, it is as if my soul is ripped through the roof of my body. It is a dreamless sleep, a cool mist through which I float like an albatross. The mist then rises above me and below is a dry, barren landscape with distant horizons. Far away there are mountains over which the sky is perfectly ridged into grey rows of foreboding cloud.

Everywhere I look there is space, an immense amount of space. Again there is the sensation of being drawn towards the girl. Each moment takes me closer to a simple white-walled house that stands alone on an empty plain. I believe I may reach the house. My world at one point disintegrates into a blinding orb of light. I think to myself: this must be a waking dream, for I know that I am turning my head away from a rising sun.

I manage to enter the simple house. Out of the bright sunlight, in its cool dank interior, I find myself blinded. As my eyes adjust I make out the bare crumbling brick walls. The room is empty but for an enamel-surfaced, raised concrete bath in the centre, cemented to the dusty floor. I find the girl lying naked in the bath, the dirty brown water covered with the heads of proteas.

There is a rich, suffocating odour of proteas in the room – I can feel myself beginning to choke on the richness of the air. Her face is white, devoid of expression, her eyes lidless. Surrounding her pale child's body, her groin

hairless, there are numerous protea petals floating on the brown surface. They stick to her skin like moths to a wall of light.

Suddenly the surface is broken, the dirty water seeming to incite itself into a turmoil of movement. The child disappears under the water. She is not drowning, she does not struggle. The expression on her face remains blank. She is already dead.

Finally the image is torn away from me. I begin to imagine that I hear a radio turned high, a voice babbling incessantly, urgently. I am at the cusp of sleep. I wake on the beach, curled against the cold early hours of the morning with my face pressed into the sand.

I sleep through the afternoon while Catherine reads. When I wake she has not yet spoken to me. Eventually, sitting at the edge of the bed, she begins sobbing.

'You are so cold,' she says. 'There is something wrong with you. You have become so distant.' After a pause, more bitterly, 'We looked for you for two hours last night.'

I take her shoulders in my hands. I rub the skin around her neck. She remains motionless. When I begin to strip her, she stops me.

Her voice cold, she says, 'I am going to the beach. I will see you later.'

She leaves. I sit at the edge of the bed and watch as the sad dusk light leaves the corners of the room. I drink gin with concentration, staring at the ice dissolve through the alcohol.

3

If I choose I may walk forever. I wear only thin slacks and a t-shirt and I walk on a road that moves east out of Puerto Escondido and when the sun sets I will walk through the night and the cold air will begin to kill me. When the sun rises I will walk through the day and my body will begin to dry like wood and my heart will become wood and my mouth will be as dry as ash. In the night again I will embrace my fatigue as a lover and I will know for certain on the third day that I will die. The skin at the back of my neck will be as crisp as burnt paper. My head will swim with sun-stroke visions and fever will finally overcome me. I will collapse to the ground at the side of the road. I will let my body take my soul.

I come to a small town that is on the outskirts of Puerto Escondido. There is a small zocalo, a few buildings on each side of the square, a few trees, their trunks painted white, and a bench. I sit on the bench in the waning light of day and I watch as people move around in the square. In one corner of the zocalo I see a young woman, perhaps sixteen years old, who is propped up against the wall of a farmacia. She is shaded by the awning of the farmacia, which is rolled out against the sky. Beside her is an older woman, perhaps her mother.

What draws me to the girl, as I walk across the zocalo, is the symmetry of her amputations. In the light of the square I can make out that her limbs are missing. As I approach I can see more clearly her mother's face, her skin wrinkled, her eyes caved in. The girl has large brown eyes. Smooth skin tight across her face. Full lips. Her mother is squatting beside her and has thrust out a trembling hand.

What is missing on the girl are her arms and her legs. Cut off at the elbows and knees. The stumps are rounded perfectly into bulbs of flesh. Suggestive, erotic. Only slight incisions track longitudinally across the ends.

As if what had once been there had been easily removed. As if no surgery had been required, no blood. As if, before, when she had been whole, when the limbs were there, there had yet always been in those limbs the implication of things to come. Like a lizard and its tail.

I go past the girl into a cantina and I order chorizo and jamon and a cerveza. I eat and I drink the beer in long gulps. I stare out the wooden shutters at the last ribs of light from the zocalo, and I listen to the men call from the courtyard to the waiters or to their dogs.

Later I walk back along the sand path cut into the tropical vegetation towards our hotel. I cross from the path onto the highway that follows the curve of the coastline and walk towards the turnoff to Puerto Escondido. I am struck at a

point by a poster that is hanging above the road – a poster for a circus, a feria, that will pass through the village on the coming Friday.

Of the Spanish that is written on the poster I understand little. They are difficult, localised words, words used for the feria only. I imagine a particular word to stand for clown, another for gymnast, yet another for the acrobatic riders. The word 'caballo' is there. I wonder how it would be to join the feria, to simply leave my possessions at the hotel and to follow the clowns and the riders and the animals from village to village entertaining the children, selling spiritual health in old liquor bottles to the adults, getting drunk on wine and tequila, forgetting everything but the packing and the unpacking of all the boxes and the untying of the harness ropes and the feeding of the horses.

I squint at the poster in the early evening light and then finally a bus rushes by, leaving a gust of air that brings up the dust at the sides of the road. It is then that I laugh at myself, aloud, like a mad person, at my fantasy. But as I walk I wonder once again at the precise symmetry of the girl's amputations and whether perhaps she too would have been with the feria.

I tell her that I love her.

'I love you too,' she says.

'I am sorry you have been upset.'

'What has been the matter, Jason?'

'Nothing.'

'You are different. Something has changed in you.'

'Nothing has changed.'

'Why do you never speak?'

'I'm speaking now.'

'But you never say anything. You never tell me how you are feeling. You always look so sad. As if something had happened. Why won't you tell me what has happened?'

'Nothing has happened.'

'Then you won't tell me.'

'There is nothing to tell.'

'I can't talk to you anymore. Don't you understand?'

'Nothing has happened, Catherine. I love you.'

'Everything has changed since we got to Mexico. It's like you're not with me anymore.'

'I'm here. We're together.'

'Maybe we got involved too quickly. Maybe we should never have travelled together. Maybe I should have stayed in Cape Town.'

'It is good here. It is good to be away.'

'No it's not. I hate it here.'

'Then go back. I will stay. I never want to go back.'

'You don't love me,' she sobs bitterly.

These are the habits of our days: swimming, eating, sleeping. Each day we swim out to the fishing boats anchored in the bay. Each day I feel under them for the barnacles that have become sealed to the cracked and weathered wood.

There are nights that we go to watch Miguel play percussion and Jesus will join us at the table and we will drink tequila. Sometimes Catherine and I make love. Sometimes we make love and she will tell me she wants to stay with me forever. There are times she says nothing.

'We could live here,' I tell her.

She says she will leave me soon. That nothing could make her stay in Mexico. Sometimes she says that I have broken her heart, that I make her afraid. She says that she thinks that I want to hide away from the world, that I am afraid of it.

4

There is a day we choose to hike along the coastline. We set out along Zicatela in the early morning of a clear day. At the end of the long beach we go over a granite outcrop and scramble up a slope, the rock sharp in our fingers. We make our way along a stone and concrete path at the edge of the ocean.

This is a way in which we can be together. We can move along the coast like two pre-lapsarian creatures, walking together in a landscape that is new, innocent. We too are innocent – the words we speak have never before been

spoken. The memory of our tensions will dissipate amongst the odours of the great ocean.

We know this to be a negotiation, this walk. She will leave soon, she has told me. No longer does she say this to hurt; she no longer looks for my reaction as she says it. I will offer her words. If I speak words to her, if the sentences they construct make sense then I will buy her back. But I cannot find these words.

I determine I will offer her the landscape.

We walk along the coastline and watch the dark blue surface of the water rush like an outstretching viscous arm into the small inlets along the coast. As the surge of the swell subsides, there are left the retreating fingers of foamy white water, bubbling over the sharp rock, being sucked back. The rock is pockmarked with the acne of dark brown clams and dull red lichen. It glistens, between the high points of the swell like an oily skin.

On a large flat rock we stop and Catherine takes out the marijuana she has bought from Jesus and we begin to smoke it through a risla. We watch the toppling of one of the larger swells bursting from its centre, crashing down onto the submerged rock ahead of us. For a time my mind goes blank, concentrating on the sensation of the drug and the motion of water. I listen to the waves with my eyes closed.

I lose my concentration so that other sounds begin to emerge; children's sing-song voices – they are swimming in a natural pool some way behind us – the more limpid, yet childish, cry of a gull; the faint buzz of a fisherman's engine; and the sound of our own bodies, our breathing, my breathing, shallow and quick.

Scrambling off the rock, we come again onto the stone path and as we walk we hold hands. There is a gentle sea-breeze that begins to blow across the coastline from the north-west, drying the heat and the salt off our skin. We take the path and for long stretches it borders a beach strewn with broccoli-shaped seaweed, covered in broken shells and small, sea-smoothed rocks. Finally the beach begins to narrow, disappearing into the sea, cut off by an overhanging rock outcrop. The path twists over loosely arranged stone steps onto the crest of the overhang. From there we make out a small stone bridge built across a ravine.

There are three young Mexican men, dressed only in their swimming trunks, their lithe athletic bodies moving loosely. We watch as one of the men dives. He stands first at the very edge of the bridge, balancing off the balls of his feet, his calf muscles bunched tight. He raises the barrel of his chest, his head held high, the smooth muscles in his back stretching across his torso as he raises both arms into the air. Then, leaning forward, he pivots off the apex of his feet. He swings towards the mouth of the ravine.

He hits the water perfectly straight, so that he leaves only a white bubbling trail in the heart of the swell. He comes up like a cormorant, his arms held behind him.

Catherine and I walk back to our hotel, back along that stone path, and not a single word is spoken between us. We make love on our bed in our room in the hotel and still there is not a word that is spoken. Even at dinner, watching the Mexican boys trawl broken nets through the surf, holding the lamps over the white water to attract the fish, still there are no words between us.

Finally words are spoken.

For a time we are able to pretend that there is not carried in those words, like a dormant parasite, the sweet scent of decay.

She tells our history to Jesus one night at his home in the hills above Puerto Escondido.

If you took a photograph of the three of us – each of us have been given our own leather couch, we face out towards the balcony and look out when there is silence – you might think of us as content.

'So you meet in a club?'

'Yes,' she laughs. 'We couldn't hear each other, but we pretended to listen.'

'He touches you first?'

'Yes. He was clumsy. He tried to kiss me at my car.'

'You pushed him away. You don't kiss a man you have just met. You are an honourable woman.'

'He called the next day.'

'You were studying at University?'

'I was just finishing my degree. Jason had just come back from his internship. It was like he didn't know anyone. He just wanted to know me.'

'You like this. You like a man to be obsessed with you.'

She laughs. 'We fell in love. I finished my degree. He wanted to travel. We eloped.'

'He was romantic. He only wanted you. He wanted to take you away.'

'We went to Europe first and then to the States. I have some family in the States. And then we came to Mexico.'

'Mexico is full of passion. It is the place for young lovers.'

'Yes,' she says.

5

Catherine gets in the back seat of Jesus's pickup and I in the front on the passenger side. He pulls the vehicle off the gravel cul-de-sac in front of our hotel onto the tarred road. We head east through the town, past it, past the sand turn-off to Playa Zicatela, eastwards, onto the main highway to Puerto Angel.

We are all three of us drunk. While we drive Jesus tells us that there was an Australian gringo who drowned there, near Puerto Angel. The gringo drowned off the beaches of Zipolite. That had happened three weeks ago.

'It is very beautiful there,' he tells us. 'You can rent an hamaca for five pesos. The gringo had drowned, he had been pacheco, and then he had drowned. Of course one may smoke, puede fumar, but then one should have respect for the ocean.'

'Tonto,' he says. 'Muy tonto.'

I say the word to myself, *tonto*, and somewhere through the amplification of the voice in my head I hear Catherine's – as if balancing my own. Then I wonder how long it had taken the Australian to drown and what he might have thought of when he had been struggling against the fatigue in his muscles and the constant splashing of the salt water on his face, into his eyes, his mouth.

I hear her voice again and feel her touch me.

'Where are we?' she asks Jesus.

He tells her that we are on the road to another village and that we can get something there.

She asks him, 'What something?'

He says she will like it and he smiles at her and then we are quiet and we look ahead at the moth of amber headlights flutter before us. Across the two ovals of the screen of headlights an owl passes, its movement unbalanced in its desperate need for torque.

She says that she thinks it was an owl and I say nothing and Jesus says nothing and then she says my name.

'I am fine,' I tell her.

We stand outside a brick house. Jesus goes to the door and raps on it. There is nothing, only the squeal of a pig from somewhere behind the darkness. I feel Catherine beside me, her warmth. I feel her shudder. I wonder at the mud of the streets and the mud everywhere caking the vehicles and one's feet and everything it touches. Then there is a rustle from within and the metal door scraping against the concrete lintel and a voice.

Jesus shouts back a few words in Spanish. The door opens and Jesus calls us and we go into a room dimly lit. We are offered a bed to sit on. Jesus introduces a man called Federico. His face is shadowed above the scope of the lamp, but it seems to express a smile. We tell him our names as we shake his hand. Jesus speaks with him as he goes to a dresser and draws it open. He pulls out a bottle and stands it upright on a table. He offers it to me to pull the cork. The bottle goes first to Jesus, then to Federico who draws heavily, then to Catherine. She holds the bottle between her thighs and stares at it.

'It is mescal,' Jesus says. 'It is good for your soul.'

'It is good for the marijuana,' Federico says. 'It is good if you smoke too much marijuana.'

Catherine sits at the edge of the wire-sprung bed on the shallowed mattress. Federico opens the dresser again and pulls out a small plastic packet. Jesus takes the bottle from her and smiles at her and says she should take a drink.

'It will do you good,' he says.

She takes the bottle from him, lifting it to her mouth, and takes a deep gulp. She spills across her chin, lowers the bottle and begins to giggle. She stretches across to me and touches my leg.

I move my hand across hers. I take a long drink and feel the liquid burn through me.

Federico is now cutting cocaine into lines on a surface on his table. Jesus gets up and goes to the table, leans across and takes in a line through a rolled ten peso note. He holds himself still for a moment, then turns to Catherine. I can feel the pressure of her hand leave my thigh as she goes over to the table and I can see her lean across it with his arm holding her across her shoulders. She is wearing her old jeans and I can see the line of her underwear pull on her body beneath the surface of her jeans.

After a moment, in the dull light of the room, I see her shudder and raise herself as she tilts her head back to stare at the ceiling. Her eyes are closed and the skin across her throat is pulled tight with her chin held high. I see Jesus and Federico who stare at her, at her face raised up and her breasts held high. She spins slowly on her heels, unsteady. She opens her eyes finally and appears

surprised and she seems to gather orientation in a few slow seconds, smiling to herself, making me out sitting at the edge of the bed.

'Jason,' I hear Jesus say to me.

I go to the table. On an old hardcover book there are two lines of cocaine and Federico hands me the rolled note, damp at one end. I take in a line.

For a second there is nothing and then suddenly a tingling across my teeth and then a sense of anaesthesia in my face and then a sharp rush of pressure through the back of my skull.

Federico laughs, 'It is good here in Mexico, no?'

I feel myself reeling. I feel that my body has suddenly expanded in mass and that my muscles have become hardened and brittle. The room is no longer dimly lit, the single bulb is now bright white and hot. Moving away from its heat, I stumble backwards. I hear thinly Jesus and Federico laugh.

I go slowly back to the bed, pulling myself onto it. Leaning back against the wall, I force myself to remain calm. For a long while I wonder only at the rush of ideas through my head.

I realise finally that everything is as it appears, only it is all dead.

Later I emerge from a kind of slumber, struggling to orientate myself, to find a measure for the time that has passed. I am slumped across the bed and wake to salsa music playing through the radio. Federico is still sitting at his table with his head bowed down toward his crotch and Jesus and Catherine are standing

together in the centre of the room. Jesus is stuck in my gaze holding her hand in his two hands and he is at that precise moment of glancing in my direction. His mouth is curled slightly upwards and at the edge of his eyes, under the focus of the bulb hanging from a cord in the centre of the room, there are the thin lines of a false laugh drawn out to the bone behind his temples.

What is most likely then is that she says to me am I alright, like a regular incantation. She comes over to me and sits beside me on the bed and rests her hand on my shoulder. Jesus paces around the room and is invested with a sudden surge of energy, talking to Federico in a rapid Spanish.

I sit up and we begin to pass between us a kif that Federico has rolled. I am sitting with my back to the wall and I feel suddenly that I am uncomfortable. I lean against the wall with my head hanging forward in my hands. I concentrate on the sensation in my back; on the rigidity against it. It comes to me that my back has melded solidly with the concrete of the wall, that I have become a part of the wall, that the length of my spine is irrevocably lost to me, that it is made of steel.

I am a small dead animal left by a butcher bird hanging on the knot of a barbed wire fence.

6

I will say to Catherine, 'Let's go.'

She will look at me and for a moment she will hesitate and then she will say, 'Alright, Jason, let's go.'

She will look at Jesus and smile at him and he will say to us, 'We will go now. There is something I must do first. You wait a few minutes, yes?'

Jesus and Federico will go out through the metal door and I will feel the cool night air come through into the smoke of the room, cutting through it with a rich sea odour. You can breathe that sea air and feel your head go light with it. You can taste it.

Perhaps he will come back after a while, alone, and say that I should go with him outside to look at the car.

'You come, Jason,' he will say. 'Maybe you know how to help.'

'What is the matter?'

'It will not start.'

'It was going fine before. What about the fuel?'

'Claro,' he will say. He will smile then. Come, he seems to be saying, come outside, that is all.

Perhaps it is when Catherine rises from the bed to go with me that I imagine his smile to change. I think again of the girl I had seen, her precise amputations, of how she might have smiled to those who had come to look at her.

I imagine Jesus then saying to Catherine, 'No. It is cold outside. There is no need for you to go.'

Jesus then shuts the door, a metal sound, and does not take his eyes off us. I can hear Federico outside coming towards the door and then he appears, excited.

He is carrying in his hand the gleam of a knife. With him, from behind his silhouette in the doorway, the cool air creeps through into the room, like a cat sidling up against a wall.

'Que paso?' Federico asks Jesus, also not taking his eyes off us, beginning to smile too a sardonic smile.

I stand transfixed in the centre of the room and I stare sullenly at the knife and I believe I hear Catherine, through the white sound that has begun roaring through my head, ask Jesus when we are going.

'Can we please go?' she sobs.

It is easier then to claim that he says to her that we will go afterwards. She begins to cry. She may have cried anyway, but I am certain it is at this point that she begins to cry. In the centre of my stomach there has begun to grow an empty sick feeling, as if some creature were in slow tedious consumption of me.

What happens next, I construct to be this: I look briefly at Catherine – she is holding her face in her hands, uncertain with fear. I look at the door across which Federico stands and at Jesus who is waiting for something to happen. I go slowly towards the door and I see Federico bristle and Jesus slide along the wall

away from me. Federico steps forward and now the grip of his hand on the knife is tightened, held at an angle, and again through a wave in my head I hear his voice tell me that I should go outside.

I carry on forward towards the door and then, as if taken and thrust by the ferocity of the sea, my head is thrown back, my eyes burnt by the white light of the bulb. I hear a high-pitched scream that cuts through Federico's excited babble. I flail like a beached fish, then fall hard to the ground, my hair still clenched in Jesus's hand. That is how I construct what happens.

Now Federico is on top of me, his knee against my chest, pushing down on my sternum, his face bright with energy. The blade of the knife is against my neck, pressuring down to break the landscape of my flesh. Beneath me I feel the small irregularities of the concrete bite into the back of my head. As I flail my arms to catch at Federico's hand I hear again Catherine's sharp scream and then she begins to sob like a child, to beg like a child.

This is what I imagine myself to hear as I lie under Federico's weight, on the concrete floor of a tiny room on the Pacific Coast of Mexico.

It is plausible enough; it has all the elements of horror.

The knife goes through my hand. It enters from a point just shy of my wrist and pierces across to the flesh between my thumb and forefinger. It is a white cold sensation that warms with the blood that emerges. It is my left hand that goes limp, my arm again thrust beneath Federico's knee. I go deaf as a drowned

man, like the man off Zipolite. I struggle like him and cry like him into an ocean of tears and then become resigned as he was to the more powerful sea.

Only intermittently does the quiet become disturbed by Catherine's screams. I see nothing but the bulb above me, blazing down, too bright to offer detail. At some point I struggle again and rip my head about, the blade twisting against my chest at a flat angle, scraping the skin.

I am like a fly daubed with ink, exhausted, every now and again charged with spurious energy.

I imagine myself thrusting into Catherine, her sobs in unison with my movements, like those of Jesus. I imagine the semen that spurts from me as I push Catherine hard against the wall, the shoulders of my back rigid with ecstasy.

It seems hours pass before Federico rises from me, his foot on my chest. I twist my head to see Catherine against the wall, her jeans ripped open, blood coming from the side of her head, her exposed stomach heaving for air between her sobs. Jesus now sits against my chest and takes the knife from Federico. He sits on the centre of my chest and slices at my legs as I attempt to swing them around him. Again the cold metal goes through my flesh. Again the warmth of my blood soaks my clothes.

Federico's grunts space themselves in regular beats, Catherine now heaving and heaving, no longer sobbing. I am free finally and stagger to my feet and go to her as Federico leans against the wall, tightening his belt.

It is he who then thrusts the knife into her throat, the blood opening out in a fountain that soaks the floor. Her body shudders and twists from the wall across the floor, doubling over, then finally going still.

The blood is black that comes from under her head, seeping viscous like the dark solution of an experiment across a landscape of concrete. I am fixed in wondering about that, at that difference, at the way that blood moves across air, across earth, across water.

7

The road to Oaxaca is covered in potholes. I leave the station in Puerto Escondido and go straight to the back of the bus and watch as the other travellers get on. They are all Mexican, bar one tourist; much like myself he carries only a backpack which gets strapped to the roof and then he comes onto the bus and takes a window seat. I watch him from my own seat as the bus sits for a time that seems interminably long.

The bus finally pulls off onto the highway and I sleep and dream of death. There is a room with four bunk beds, light from the passage which breaks under the door into a square of illumination, the sense of others in the room. Probably

it is a hostel. Death is a middle-aged man who wakes me in the middle of the night to tell me that he cannot sleep. He is incongruous in the room – he is too old to be a traveller. He is a man with no place to go.

He asks if I would help him to find his way outside. He needs the fresh air. We follow the stairs down to the foyer in the dark. He clutches at my arm – his bony fingers wrapped around my wrist like a copper bracelet. The door can only be found by feeling in the dark. It opens after a struggle and then we emerge into a blinding confusion of colours and noise. Come with me, he tells me, I will show you where she is.

I wake to find the ticket-collector before me, a young boy with morsels of food stuck to his lips and a hand thrust out with insistence. Later, waking again with a pain across my arm from the pressure of my body, I watch as the boy stares out the front window, sitting with the driver in silence. For a moment death seems beautiful; a little bored, sullen.

When we stop in a small village at the edge of the plateau of the Sierra Madre del Sur the driver gets off to swap with another, who has been waiting at a small cantina attached to the station. The men stand and stretch and eat tortillas that are fried in a gas pan under the black sky. The women get off with their babies to go to the banos. I stand at the edge of the road in the dry heat of the night, listening to the crickets crackling in the bush.

I go down onto my knees, the rough texture of the tar biting through my slacks. Convulsing suddenly into a spasm of sobs.

A man wakes to find himself covered in blood. With effort he lifts himself to his feet and waits for his eyes to adjust to the dark. He makes out that he is on the side of a road, that some distance away, cut into the thick vegetation, is a small white house. He enters the house through a metal door. The door scrapes against the concrete floor.

Inside, in the dark, he sees a young woman asleep on the floor. Again he has to adjust his eyes. She is lying face-down with her hair spread out across a dark stain. He touches the stain with a finger and lifts his finger to his lips. The blood on it is still wet. It is acrid to taste. He pulls the hair off her face and strokes with his stained hand the skin of her face.

Exhausted, he hauls himself back to the threshold of the door. He leans heavily against a wall, his chest heaving to draw in air. On the floor beside her is a knife, stained black with blood.

Sitting down against the concrete wall, he pulls his legs up to his chest. He breathes with effort. Her back, in the light that has begun to enter his eyes, is bare. He notices the darker shades of bruises beginning to invent themselves on her pale skin. For a time he is fixed in watching her.

I begin a conversation in the early light of the morning with a woman who says she sells fruit in Puerto Escondido and Puerto Angel. She brings the fruit out

from Oaxaca once a week and sells it in the markets. She says the fruit is very good in Oaxaca.

'Y usted,' she says, 'Que trabaja?'

'I am a doctor,' I say.

'Si?' she says brightly.

'Si.'

'And why you in Mexico?'

I look briefly out the window, at the sparse bush scattered across the Mexican plateau, at the gold colour of the earth as the sun hinges over the horizon.

'It is a very beautiful country,' I tell her, smiling. 'Muy bonita.'

'Si,' she says once again, shaking her head.

We arrive in the Oaxacan traffic, peeling off the highway into the centre of the city. I keep my eyes fixed to the hills of Monte Alban. Even as we swing into the station and the men and women begin rising from their seats, I stare at a point a little away and above from the landscape. I get off and stand by the bus as the young Mexican boys throw the packs from the roof.

It is an old city with cobble-stoned streets and square conquistador buildings with courtyards and bouganvillea. I move through the tarpaulined market, going past men unpacking their produce and women behind the counters beginning to

cut meat and turn gas burners on. I find myself standing for minutes before a tray of organs.

'Que es esta?' I ask the woman.

'Chorizo,' she answers.

Flies hang over the tray and skirt in the air away from the motions of her hand.

'Que quieres?' she asks.

'Nada,' I answer and go out into the sun.

I find the nearest hotel, Hotel Tihautihaucan. I get a room on the second floor with a tiled interior and a mural on the wall of the room of gold in which Moctezuma had waited for his death. I think to myself that it is the wrong room, it is the wrong city, that it is all out of place. I shower and then sleep and I dream again of death.

I am going up in an elevator which stops on the fifth floor of a building. After an interminable time the doors open. There is a man who stands before the open elevator but he does not enter. In the pocket of his tuxedo jacket there is a protea flower that sticks out absurdly so that the hairs of the leaves brush against the skin of his fat neck.

He takes the protea out of the pocket of his jacket and he passes me the plant which I take in my hand and he says that now it is mine.

The doors close and the elevator once again rises and I go to the tenth floor. I step out of the elevator into a marble foyer. I look down the barreling gap between the circular stairs which wind their way up through the body of the building.

At the bottom of the stairs, on the floor of the basement of the building, his body is broken into an absurd position. His fleshy limbs are twisted like a contortionist's from his fall. He is framed by the pool of blood spreading under him.

8

Night. Music has begun playing from various of the cantinas. On a sidewalk I eat a tortilla and drink a beer. I follow complex routes through the maze of Oaxaca, going past the same facades of different buildings. It is the zocalo in the centre of Oaxaca that orientates me.

A poster catches my eye outside a theatre. It reads, in red cursive: *Peliculas Adultos*. The woman in the poster is naked, taken from a side-on perspective. She has her hair draped over the curve of her breasts. Beneath are words in Italian.

I go through to the ticket office and the woman takes the five pesos and gives me a boleto. I go in and sit two seats from the aisle towards the front and lean back in my seat, waiting for the film to begin. There are maybe eight other

men in the theatre, all Mexican, their eyes peeling at my back. I wait for the lights to go dim and then watch the jittering on the screen of the figures white and active moving across the backdrop of a natural pool and waterfall. The words that the characters speak come out as a static blare, subtitled into Spanish at the bottom of the screen.

It is a carnival of sex. The camera intermittently focuses on the crotch of a woman, her writhing, a tongue licking at her, then there is a shot from a distance, perhaps two or three bodies moving rhythmically, as if controlled as mannequins. Some minutes are spent on a mouth over a penis, sucking, licking, eyelashes heavy with mascara. I think of the director, his camera, perhaps situated on a bank to one side.

With a steady altering pressure from my hand I push down onto my rigid penis through the fabric of my slacks and begin masturbating.

I have to keep the pressure hard in order to reach the point of ejaculation. When it happens I feel the warm spurt of fluid under my slacks and I glance around in the dark and imagine that if one were suddenly to throw light on my face there would be stuck there an horrific grimace.

It is several days later that I see the paper. Under the shadow of the church on the zocalo, as the vendidos begin packing up their stalls, I buy a paper from a small boy. Although it is in Spanish I can make out the gist of it.

On the third page there is a photograph of Catherine that they must have got from her passport. The article mentions a young woman from South Africa who was found murdered in Puerto Escondido. It reads too that there is a young man who is missing. The police have been in contact with the consulate of South Africa.

I lift up my eyes then and I look around me and in particular I look at the boy who has sold me the paper. He sits on a bench opposite mine and he is scratching his ear with a finger. I look again at the paper and then fold it suddenly as if I could contain what were inside it. As if by hiding its words beneath layers of print, it would become unwritten.

It is a glance from the boy that alerts me to the sound which I make in my throat. He stares at me blankly and then I hear it; an hyena sound – a cry made beneath the layerings of language.

I spend days in my room without leaving.

I get a boy to bring me food every morning. He will bring me tortillas and cheese and sometimes meat and I pay him at the threshold of the room and always he is curious to know what is inside.

I live cloistered in my room like an assassin waiting for instructions. I must simply wait. Days or weeks or even months may go by, but there is a certain intelligence to it. It is precisely my patience that will lend meaning to the actions

I will finally enact. I imagine receiving one letter, one line of text that will make sense of the interminable time before it.

Sometimes I reread the paper. I keep it well-wrapped in a plastic packet in a drawer of the cupboard. I read the article over and over, looking in it for the elements that would make sense of my story. It mentions two Mexican men, working in Puerto Escondido, who called the police when they found the body of the woman. The article uses the word *ayudar*, to help.

From what does the insomniac suffer? A lack of sleep. Yet one would not say that the anorexic suffers from a lack of food. Rather the anorexic does not eat, as the insomniac does not sleep.

He lies awake and imagines that every movement in the night, every sound, every breath of air, invades upon his sanity. If a car were to go by then he would say that the driver shifting down a gear had caused him to remain awake. If men were to go by then the sound of their voices would disturb him, annoy him. Once they had gone he would remain awake with the thought that had they not gone past he might have fallen asleep.

Then for a while it is silent, yet the sheets stick to his body, he has an itch across his back, he twists around, realises that he is deceiving himself to have believed that he was close to sleep, gets up, turns on the light, showers, then returns to bed.

Then the crickets start up. First he blames the coffee, then thinks that perhaps what would help would be a drink. He gets up once more, goes to the cabinet, gets out the gin, adds lime, and sips at the drink. He stands barefoot staring at the wall. He thinks how absurd it is, his standing there, staring at nothing.

He goes back to the bed and lies on his back with eyes wide open. He is prevented from sleep by the bristle of memory. It was precisely her breathing, he thinks, her steady breathing, which made it possible for him to sleep.

He wakes to find himself covered in blood. He is prostrate on a concrete floor in a small room and it is the blood going cold over hours of time that wakes him. Flesh brushes against his arm as he struggles to his feet. In the dark he tentatively feels with his fingers the texture of the concrete floor, then the flesh of an arm. Like the blood that has soaked his shirt and his slacks, so the arm has gone cold.

He springs to his feet and retreats from the other with horror. His body hits a wall and he realises that he is trapped. Breathing rapidly, panting with fear, in the pitch black, he skirts the edge of the wall searching for the key to his escape.

One wall, its corner, another wall, its corner. He describes the room like a cartographer, measuring its dimensions with the instrument of his body. It is a simple square room with no door. Its roof must be just shy of the reach of his

arms. It is perhaps ten square metres in space. Somewhere in the ocean of distance between him and the opposite wall is a body gone cold.

He will have time to make that journey across the room. He will have time to find the island of her flesh in its centre, before finally going insane.

9

I grow restless in my room in the Hotel Tihautihaucan. I allow the heat of the Mexican days to gather around me. I allow a desire for comfort to drive me from my room.

Like other tourists I take a bus up to the hills that the Zapotecs flattened over fifteen hundred years ago. I walk the few blocks from the hotel in the early morning and take a bus the nine kilometre journey up to the sacred site of Monte Alban. I walk through the low grass of the plateau, over a reconstructed landscape, built on ruin. Here is the place where competing teams played the ball game. It is a narrow alley between ancient stone walls, its surface now a tended lawn, the walls draped in ferns, covered with a skin of moss and lichen. Men would fling themselves into the path of the rubber ball, their bodies bent into shape to create a surface of flesh. Months would be spent on creating the sphere of that ball, thin sheets of tree-rubber wrapped layer by layer.

Here is the stone edifice of the temple to the rain god, Cocijo, his forked tongue protruding lasciviciously; another to the bat god, his headress and

shoulder ornaments extended into ruffled wings; and a stone carving made on the palace wall to the feathered serpent.

I stare benignly at a massive spherical stone cut into the shape of a head. It's face stares back at me, inscrutable, somehow malevolent, its mouth down-turned.

At the tourist restaurant I struggle to a table and sit down and breathe deeply, recovering from the effort of moving around in the sun and the heat. It is perhaps a full month since I have left my room. I have become as pale as alabaster, as weak as an anorexic. Around me are the voices of Europe – German, French, Italian, Dutch – and of course American.

It is while I am reading from a travel guide, my legs crossed as I sit before a coffee and a sandwich, that I am finally recognised.

A voice intrudes, 'Hello, Jason.'

I raise my eyes to the voice and it is into the glare off the white table that I am forced to look to see a tall young woman before me.

She stares back at me quizzically, 'You don't remember me? Rob and I met you and your girlfriend in Cabo San Lucas, in the Baja. Remember, at the restaurant off that little hotel?'

Now another has joined her, a thin young man with a receding hairline.

'Hi,' he greets me brightly.

I stare back at them, at the way that light frames the woman's head, glowing like a halo through the edges of her thin hair. I try to place her accent, possibly British, or even Australian. I think of them as some kind of absurd joke that has been sent by a machiavellian god to taunt me.

'Jason,' the woman is now saying. 'You really don't remember us? We met you and Catherine about a month ago.'

There is an uncomfortable silence as I attempt to struggle for an answer.

Finally I frame my words. 'I remember,' I tell her weakly.

'Jason, are you alright?' the man asks.

'I am fine.'

'Where did you end up going? I remember Catherine said you might go east to Veracruz.'

'We didn't get there.'

'And Mexico City.'

'We were there just one day.'

'And now from Oaxaca? Are you going further south?'

Once again I leave an uncomfortable space of silence between us, allowing the gulf to widen.

'I am not sure where I am going,' I answer.

The woman finally asks, betraying in her voice a hint of concern, 'Jason, where is Catherine?'

It would be easier then to simply smile and tell them, this couple we met in Cabo San Lucas, that Catherine was tired today and decided not to join me on the trip to Monte Alban. That she will regret it when we finally return to South Africa, that she will never have seen the stone idol to the god Chac, who wreaked the havoc of floods upon the lands of the Mayans.

But I simply stare back at her, then avert my eyes and close my book. I gather my items into my bag as the couple continue to stand at the end of the table. I stand and glance back at them, move slowly between the tables off the veranda of the restaurant.

I escape into a throng of tourists just disembarked from a bus, merging with them. I imagine the couple continuing to watch me from their table at the restaurant, staring after me. I am spoken to sternly in Italian by the guide who is now leading us through the forecourt of a temple. I am walking too close to the precipitous edge. The group looks at me with disapproval and I manage to wander off down the massive stone steps into a forested alcove behind the temple. I take long deep breaths sitting with my back rigid against ancient stone.

I determine that I will simply take the next bus down from Monte Alban back to Oaxaca. If I wait quietly in this alcove I will have no need to fear contact again with the couple. In the backs of their minds they will not glue disparate facts together, perhaps they do not even read the papers.

Voices suddenly intrude and I turn to search for their origin – a woman's teasing giggle and then suddenly a peal of laughter. I make out through the dense bush a man and a woman writhing against each other. They have hidden themselves in a small clearing behind a lonely stone edifice that is broken away from the body of the temple construct.

I look away from them and then suddenly I am compelled to move. I must escape back to my room where I will be cloistered against nature, against people.

Yet as I stand I am overcome with a dizziness. I hear a shrill ringing in my ears. Cold beads of sweat form across my forehead.

I manage to stagger back to the parking lot that stands outside the information desks and join a queue. I am in the process of pulling myself up onto a bus when a hand pulls me down.

'Donde esta su boleto?' the Mexican asks.

I turn blindly toward him, his puffed out face, his dead eyes, and I stammer. I fumble like a child in my pockets, the tourists behind me staring impatiently.

'I don't have one,' I finally manage to say.

His hand, in a single movement, takes my shoulder and pulls me to the side. Two or three tourists get on the bus and then he turns towards me again.

'Donde esta su passaporte?' he asks.

I stand stricken before him.

'Donde esta su passaporte?' he repeats more urgently.

Still there are tourists who are waiting to embark the bus and they watch this scene unfold from the safety of the queue. Once again I begin the pantomime of searching my pockets, pulling my bag from my shoulders and rummaging through it. It is then that the couple arrive, as if they had simply been waiting in the wings for their cue, stepping onto the stage which is the scene of my paranoia.

The man called Rob says to the bus-driver, 'Hay una problema?'

'Si,' he responds boredly, 'El no tiene un boleto.'

'Cuanto cuesta un boleto?'

'No. No es importante. El no tiene.'

'Pero, cuanto cuesta. Nosotros pagamos para esta boleto.'

'No,' I hear myself tell them. 'I will pay.'

'It's ok,' he says. 'We'll get it. The driver is just being difficult.'

'No.' I hear myself say more firmly.

I watch myself then turn from them, away from the bus and begin walking back to the temples. I watch the purpose with which I walk and then I am running, running across the open tended square of lawn where once over a millenia ago Mayans had gathered to watch their priests higher up speak to them from the terraces of the temples.

Through Monte Alban into the forest, transformed into animal logic, I watch my mind escape from itself.

10

Beneath me the path is difficult. Stones, boulders, and shallow dips hinder my movement. I notice that I am alone, that I am running. I stop. The world wheels past me, leaving tracks of light. It is imperative suddenly that I wipe my brow. Sweat itches at me.

The town is ahead, behind is only darkness. Daylight seems an age ago, another life. There is a clarity to my thinking now, an insistent drive forward. I walk with determination through the narrow break cut into the vegetation of the mountain, then emerge onto the highway into Oaxaca. Now in the darkness, in the middle of the night, the ocean of my mind settles.

On the main road through Oaxaca I slow down, exhausted. Lights, noise, a rush of cars and trucks going by. I take a bus from the edge of the city towards the zocalo. In the centre of the city, before the huge ornate Cathedral built by the Spaniards, TV sets have been set up for the locals to watch the election debates. Everywhere there are the huge political posters, their primary colours.

Hundreds of people have begun to emerge from the streets, as if from tunnels that lead through to the enormous cavern of the zocalo. I tell myself that I will be safest amongst a crowd of people, that here, in the very centre of Oaxaca, before the apocalyptic sight of a pyramid of television sets, I will achieve anonymity.

And then a loudspeaker booms in a rapid Spanish and I am in a nightmare of an operatic construction. I am running from the zocalo, pushing through the flood of people gathered around me.

I run down a main road then turn down a narrow street and soon it is quiet, the loudspeaker now only the distant bass sound of authority. I lean against a wall and catch my breath.

I am fugitive, cowering among shadows.

Before a door I stand and I am confused suddenly by a rush of movement past me. I look back and see two men go down the stairs toward the street. From the narrow alley I must have climbed these stairs, perhaps afraid of the people who have now begun returning from the rally in the zocalo.

Above the door a red glow emerges from a window-pane above the lintel. I knock at the door, yet at first there is no response. From behind the door I can hear salsa music play. Once again I knock, this time louder. Finally there is a voice behind the door, impatient.

'Que?' says the voice.

'Quiero tomar,' I answer.

The door is opened slightly and a young Mexican man wearing a moustache stares back at me.

'Esta lugar no es para turistas,' he says.

'I want a drink,' I tell him.

'This place,' he says, 'this place is not for gringos.'

'I want a drink,' I say again.

The man opens the door and steps close to me and taps a finger against his ear.

'Eschuche,' he says. 'Not for you, this place.'

I can see past the man several wooden tables to a side and an empty dance floor and a barman behind a wooden counter. When I say to the man again that I wish to enter, he pushes me away from the door. As I stumble back attempting to regain myself I feel suddenly a sharp burst of pain in my stomach.

I stumble to the floor, one of my knees knocking hard against the concrete.

'Fucking gringo,' I hear the voice above me.

I lie for a long time on the concrete, facing away from the door. I can see, just off the lip of the stairs, a rusted coke can caught in the vegetation. Pieces of hardened sand, caught into doughy handfuls, are scattered down the steps. If I focus on the texture of the sand, the intensity of the pain is lowered.

Arms quite suddenly lift me and hold me up.

A face comes into view. I want to get away, then I wish to lash out. The man's voice, his smile, as though amused by me, makes me stop.

'Borracho?' asks the man. The sound makes no sense. 'Borracho o pacheco?' the voice goes on.

The man laughs. 'Tourist, you are drunk,' he says.

He pulls me up and takes me down the stairs. When I reach the road again, I sit down heavily on the lower step.

'Leave me alone,' I say to myself.

The man laughs again.

'This town always makes the tourists loco,' he says. 'Como te llamas? What is your name?'

I do not respond.

The man sits down beside me and again I whisper to myself. I can sense his movements next to me, his hands slipping into a small bag he is carrying. He looks at his hands, their olive colour, the nails darkened at the edges. I attempt to get up and again I am pulled down.

'Wait,' he says. 'You like to drink mescal,' he goes on, passing the can to me.

I lift up the can to the light and look at it, a Miranda refresco can, used, into which he has poured the alcohol from his bottle.

I think of that word, *pelado*, a word we had first heard, Catherine and I, in San Blas, meaning bald, but also somehow in Mexico signifying one who scavenges.

'What do you want from me?' I ask him.

'Drink, drink,' he instructs. 'Mescal is good for you. You are pacheco. You smoke too much. Then you drink mescal. What is your name?'

I lift the can carefully to my lips. I am overwhelmed for a moment by a cloud of nausea. I can feel myself shaking, then, with great concentration, I force the

can to my mouth. In seconds there is an immense burning through my throat, down into my chest. I drop the can.

'Cabron!' the man says bitterly.

We sit together, the man chattering intermittently in broken English. I remain completely silent. I am slumped over, with my legs across the cobbles of the street, my head hanging. The pain in my hand and arm goes on.

I wonder at the pain, at its regularity, at the nausea it causes in me. I finally allow the pelado's voice to intrude.

'No t'clabas,' he is saying, pulling at me.

I turn to him and for the first time look closely at him. His face is thin and wide, half-Indian, mestizo. His moustache is proud, his eyes slightly squint.

'Who are you?' I ask him.

He stares at me. 'Amigo,' he says, 'You are crazy. You must come with me. You must not sit and look at yourself. You need a woman. Quieres mujer. Una puta.'

I look away from him. I peer at the men who go past down the narrow street. Across from the steps two men stare at us. A young woman passes us, her eyes fixed ahead.

'I know a place,' the pelado goes on. 'It is called La Isla de las Mujeres. A place of putas. There are many women there who like you.'

I look at him and he stares back at me.

'Come amigo,' he says impatiently.

We follow the narrow street away from the zocalo and I manage to keep the pelado away from any of the main roads. At one point he seems exasperated with me for not taking his route, but eventually throws his arms up and grabs my arm and we go back a few hundred metres the way we came and go down another alley. He speaks little, only jogging ahead, every now and again turning back to make sure I am still with him.

I notice that he has begun to sweat heavily. He wipes his forehead furiously, then peers back at me. He appears relieved finally when we come out to an open section of street across which there is a dark canal that cuts through the city. Soon we are moving in the dark at the edge of the dirty canal.

I say to him, **'What is the name of this canal?'**

'Que?' he pants.

'What is the name of this canal, this river?'

And I point at it, at its dark shape that cuts east-west through the southern part of the city, at the litter that is sprawled across it. There are no street lights here, but across from the canal, perhaps a hundred metres to the other side, across an open lot, there is a marquee and some coloured lights that flash over the black water.

'Rio Atoyac,' he says as we go past blocks of flats built close together, narrow alleys between them, perpendicular, like dark funnels between the blades of a massive grille.

At some point we go past a small bar across the street with a sign outside which reads 'Dos Equis' and further on there is only the dark street but we go on until suddenly the pelado crosses the street and moves back towards the bar. We are perhaps ten metres from the door to the bar when the pelado stops.

'Bueno,' he says.

He scans first the stretch of the street, peering across the canal at the marquee which looks to be a fiesta or a circus, then turns back to me.

'Bueno,' he repeats, then blurts out, 'Esta es necessario pagar.'

I wonder for a moment what he means and then I laugh out aloud and I turn my head up towards the dark sky over Oaxaca. He looks at me confused, then spits out onto the road his offence.

'Andale,' I say to please him. 'We will pay.'

'Pero,' he goes on valiantly. 'Yo no tengo nada. I have nothing. A lo mejor tu tienes. You have money. You have dollars.'

Then I look away from him and for a moment I suppose I feel a kind of welling sadness but I tuck my head down and draw up my hands to my face and I feel the texture of my face, I feel the stiff bristly hairs of my unshaven face scratch along the palms of my hands.

I look at him impatiently and I ask him where it is, this place we are going to, and I point towards the light from the bar, and I ask him is that where we are going. Then let us go. He looks uncertain for a second, then he looks out across

the street and goes towards the door. He moves unsurely, as if he were weighing up a gamble; whether the gringo will pay or whether perhaps he will not pay.

This is the construction of that moment: him moving towards that door. I allow him to be my conduit. I watch my mind shift, go cold.

11

In front of the door, from which we can now hear the tinny sound of a Spanish love song, the pelado takes a coin out of his pocket and begins scraping the coin methodically across it. First there is only the music. Then a man opens the door slightly ajar, and peers at the pelado.

'Tienes?' he asks the pelado sharply.

The pelado nods and then we enter. There is a bar at the back of a large room, the floor is concrete, lit by red bulbs hanging from the ceiling. There are six or seven people dancing to the music. The men are slim, their hair shaved aggressively short. They dance with young women who wear tight skirts, high heels. Who move like mannequins in the arms of the men.

To the left, on a raised wooden stage, are four musicians and a cantana – a Mexican woman, somewhere in her forties, overweight, her flesh protruding over the tightness of her skirt.

I am the only gringo. Several of the women leaning against a far wall stare at me. The pelado leads me to a table.

I ask him, pointing at another table, 'Quien son ellos.'

'Soldades,' he answers.

Finally the song ends and I watch as the couples disengage. One of the women struggles to free herself. The soldier laughs loudly as she flares, as she rips her arm from his grip. He spits on the floor as she walks away. The room is quiet for a while, the men slouching across their tables. The women go to the bar and bring cervezas back.

One man rises from his table, looks straight at a short plump woman who is leaning against the far wall. She stares at him, her face a portrait of dull expectation. Finally she nods and he goes to meet her. When the music begins again they have left through a door behind the bar.

'Si quieres,' the pelado tells me. 'Cuesta ochenta pesos. Muy caro. It is much money here unless you are a soldade.'

At the end of the song, during which the pelado furtively scans the room, a short fat man comes onto the stage to introduce the stripper. She steps awkwardly onto the raised platform, corrects her stance, and begins dancing to the music which suddenly blares out of the speakers. She is dressed in a tight red tango dress, cut deeply across the length of her thighs, accentuating her breasts, ending tightly at a collar around her neck.

I watch her movements with austerity, with a cold fascination.

'Muy guapa,' the pelado intrudes. 'I like her. She is young, no?'

I turn to him and I raise my hand to his shoulder and I pull him towards me. I can feel his surprise at the pressure of my hand, at my control over him.

I speak to him, into his ear, as if whispering to a friend.

'Have you ever seen blood?' I ask him. 'Have you ever seen blood move across concrete? At the way it seeps into the concrete?'

He remains still although I can feel his desire to move away and he looks at me sharply and then away.

'Que?' he says.

I say it again. I feel a smile play across my lips and this time he nods.

'Si, si,' he says enthusiastically now, feigning.

I laugh at him and he faces me, pulling his shoulder out of my grasp and he laughs too. He turns back to watching the dancer and I watch him watch her, his not seeing her, calculating in his mind the chances of his gamble, the chances of the gringo actually paying.

I too watch the girl. Her hair is tied tightly back, there is rouge on her olive cheeks and a layer of make-up painted onto her face, across her mouth, circling her eyes.

She dances awkwardly, overzealous, then suddenly shy, play-acting, squeamish. It is easier for her once she has her dress off.

Now she wears only a thin g-string and is writhing on the floor, her knees apart, her pelvis raised. She begins to arouse herself, her fingers working furiously between her thighs. Her hips sway rhythmically in a circular motion.

'Mira, mira,' I hear the pelado shout.

The music begins again, less sentimental now, more salsa. The cantana is back on the stage and the girl has picked up her clothes from the wooden platform and made off for behind the bar. The couples go back to the dance floor, the women bored.

It is during a moment of watching for this expression of boredom on the face of one of the women that I feel a hand on my shoulder and for the briefest moment imagine it to be Catherine's hand.

I turn around to face a young woman in her twenties with mestizo features, long black hair, her breasts squeezed together by her top.

'Quieres una muchacha?' she says.

The pelado turns to her, 'Como estas, Diana?'

But she ignores him. More intently she repeats, 'Quieres una muchacha?'

There is a moment within the negotiation that then ensues between the pelado and the woman, between her arrival at the table and my following her across the filthy floor, around the edge of the wooden bar and through a door that opens to a narrow passage, to a room with a candle and a low bed against the wall of the cubicle, that I am certain of myself, of my agency. Imagine knowing in a moment of epiphany the precision of one's mind, its organic calculations.

I am required to undress myself while she fetches the towels. She locks the door behind her and I look around the room, perhaps eight square metres in size,

graffiti scrawled across the walls, the dismal bedding. Once my shirt is off I run my fingers across the scars that have formed over the surface of my chest, a criss-cross pattern, a child's drawing made in haste. And through the centre of those scratches runs a deeper scar, a long precise scar that begins below my solar plexus and ends at the hollow of my throat. I touch my fingers to that scar as if they were the fingers of a child, fascinated with the texture.

She returns to the room and instructs me to take off my slacks and then demands payment. One hundred pesos. I take out my wallet from my slacks and pay her and then I am told to lie back on the bedding.

She undresses herself before me. A child's body, small breasts over which she briefly runs her hands, glancing at me with her head held to the side, quasi-erotic, a furthering of the pantomime.

She struggles to arouse me. I watch her as she works with her hands, caressing my legs, with her mouth she breathes her stale breath over my chest, touching with her tongue at the dead flesh of the scar that runs across my flesh.

'Que es esta?' she murmurs.

'Nada,' I tell her.

Then she has her mouth over my penis and works at it methodically and still there is not a shudder within me. I lie like a cadaver, cold and dead, my skin dry to her touch. Somehow an odour, perhaps the girl's, begins to wash through me – it is the odour of proteas. The girl has now mounted me and moves rhythmically, staring at the wall behind my head. After I come she squats over

me, taking the towel from beside the bed and then throws it over my torso. She stands beside the bed and pulls her dress over her shoulders and still since my single word to her she has not spoken a word. I stand up from the bed and then I touch briefly her shoulder, a brush of my fingers against the skin of her shoulder and she turns surprised, this touch incongruous.

I take her shoulders in my hands and I run my hands up her neck, my thumbs moving across the soft flesh of her temples. She stares at me blankly then pulls her hand across mine, impatient now to get out of the room.

My hands are now more firm on her head. She is about to make a sound when I draw her face to mine and close my mouth over hers. I feel her legs kick at me as I draw a hand from my hold on her head to a position under her chin and I push her head back, holding her mouth closed with my hands, one behind her head. She swings violently at me with her arms and her legs, scratching at me, slight animal noises emerging from between her teeth. I push her hard against the floor, her small body knocking hard, one arm caught beneath her, and in a single movement as she writhes on the floor, I snap her neck.

Her body goes still, shudders, then goes still once again. Now she lies on the floor a dead child, her head held at a crooked angle to her body, a trace of blood emerging from between her lips. The shift of her dress rides over her stomach, her legs and torso are bare. I stare at her for an interminable time.

In the corridor I look briefly towards the door behind the bar, then in the opposite direction. I can make out only the closed doors of two or three more

cubicles and a wall, another corridor snaking to the left. At the junction I go left and there is a door that opens into a filthy bathroom, the toilet stained around its rim, a naked bulb hanging over the concrete floor. There is a sealed window above the toilet. I stand on the rim of the toilet, take off my shirt and wrap my hand in it. I punch out the glass of the window and hear then a high-pitched scream, a voice beginning to shout *Mira*, *Mira*, and I crawl through that window, an angle of glass slicing across my stomach, the sick feeling of being cut, the nausea of pain. I drop from the lip of the window hard onto the ground and I am running wildly now through a dark alley and emerge onto the road that parallels the river.

I make for a small bridge that crosses the river. I make for the lights of the fiesta, the huge marquee the pelado and I had seen before. I look back briefly only once and still I see that no-one is behind me and then I am running more slowly, for when I have reached the massive tents I see that it is not a fiesta. Rather I was right in first thinking it was a circus. A circus at the edge of the Rio Atoyac. There is a camel that stands blithely in the darkness, tied by a thick rope to a peg and from within the tent I hear cheers, then a hushed moment of silence, then cheers once again.

I break into an American RV van, and I steal a white shirt that is too large for me from a cupboard of clown's costumes and now I am laughing. Already the cut has left a blood stain on the shirt, but I go out of the caravan and circumvent the marquee until I come to its entrance. The show has already begun, I go past

the ticket-collector, search in my pockets for money and find a blood-stained ten-peso note. The ticket-collector, a young woman, looks strangely at me as I go past her. I climb the wooden stairs up several rows and take an empty seat.

I am in a huge marquee filled with people, light, the sound of cheers, a carnival air. In the centre of the sand pit, a circle within a ring of stands, an elephant is being led off stage by the ringmaster. Music blares from loudspeakers held high over the heads of the crowd from high up in the scaffolding of the marquee.

The ringmaster then returns. The music dies down. The crowd rustles as the ringmaster begins speaking. As he speaks, in a Spanish I am unable to grasp, the crowd goes absolutely still. The ringmaster speaks more slowly, accentuating his words. There is the sense of something sad now within the crowd. The tone of the evening has gone from ecstatic to forlorn. Slowly, on a massive wood platform that is drawn across the sand on wooden skis by three men pulling on a thick rope, a man emerges, an enormous naked mass of flesh. Each limb of his body is swollen like the limbs of a deepwater pressurised suit. His bald head sits upon the mass of his fleshy shoulders like an egg. His obese body is a prison of flesh. His movements are slow, as if they were made underwater. The crowd gasps. He is naked, exposed to them, layers upon layers of flesh wrapped around him.

Some in the crowd jeer. He stares back at them. The ringmaster chides the crowd, thrusting out his arm as he becomes more impassioned, approaching the

very verge of the stands, appealing to them. Someone throws something from the stands which falls short of the wooden platform, and the crowd erupts. The man is drawn on his platform back out of the sand ring.

Now it is a carnival of the deformity of flesh, a celebration of the absurdity of the body. Two anorexic women, unable to stand, are carried on chairs by young athletic gymnasts into the pit. The young men crouch at either side of the chairs as if presenting a prize to the audience. Then a man over seven foot, needing his cane. Then a man with breasts, a woman with facial hair, a man without ears, even a pair of siamese twins. And finally a young girl is brought into the pit, her arms and legs missing, the stumps perfectly rounded into bulbs of flesh – the enigma of empty flesh.

12

Our bus comes into the heart of Tuxtla Gutierrez. In early morning light the low buildings, built narrowly together, appear a beautiful grey colour. The landscape of hills that surround the city are dry, thinly vegetated. The skyline is jagged; satellite dishes, telephone poles, electricity poles and solar panels. The bus I have taken through the night from Oaxaca is caught in traffic. A line of vehicles leading down a long straight road into the centre of the city.

I have not slept one moment. I have taken the second-class bus and the journey has been eight hours of cramped humanity. In each village we pick up

more people. The driver has a young boy with him who screams out of the windows, *Tuxtla*, *Tuxtla*, who is happy to be moving through the landscape of Mexico, a pilot of this old school bus.

A blood-stained white shirt, my day-pack filled with a few books and clothes, some money, my passport – these are the things I now carry with me.

The bus lurches in ten-metre shifts in the crammed traffic, the brakes leaving the faint burning smell of rubber in the stuffy air. At the outskirts of the city centre, at a stop light I pull my pack to my back and squeeze my way through the standing passengers. The boy looks surprised, almost hurt, when I ask to get off.

'Pero,' he says. 'Nosotros vamos.'

'Let me off,' I command him quietly.

The driver glances back at us and then flicks his fat wrist boredly at the boy.

'Andale,' he shouts.

The door swings open with the sound of escaping air and then I am on the busy streets, pushing my way through a throng of people, past vendidos at the side of the road, past gas burners on which meats are sizzling, past the massive signs advertising Delicados cigarettes and the bright colours of the refrescos.

I must avoid the stations, I tell myself. Yet I continue on towards the zocalo, walking for an hour in the growing heat. I stop at one point and sit at a table in a road-side restaurant and order a full breakfast. I eat ravenously, devouring my food in mouthfuls of grease and oil. I drink my coffee in long gulps.

When I enter the station there is a mass of people milling about in the hall. Outside the buses are lined up like aircraft. Several policemen stand near the embarkation entrance, and several patrol along the outside walls of the hall. It is no matter, I tell myself. There are policemen everywhere in Mexico, and this is close to the Chiapas. People are afraid of bombs. There has been news of a military build-up in the Chiapas since the recent attack of the Zapatistas from the Lacadonian forest. I am invisible, here, I tell myself.

One policemen stares at me, looks down at a notebook and raises his eyes once again, but I rapidly move off towards the bathrooms. In a tiny, clinically-clean cubicle I take off the stained shirt. I have kept remembering this shirt, its stain - the way that one remembers through a day the vestiges of a bad dream from the night before. I wipe myself down with a towel, rinse the towel in a basin of water, wipe down my body once again, then throw the stained shirt and the towel into a corner of the cubicle. I emerge with a fresh shirt, my hair damp from washing my face and I stride out of the bathroom. I pass the policeman as he is ambling towards me and smile briefly at him before going to the ticket office. Again I have the sense, as I am waiting for the woman behind the glass grille to issue me with the ticket, that she is comparing me to a photograph that is lying out of my sight on her desk.

I scan my memory for the origin of that photograph, how old it might be. Perhaps as old as ten years, perhaps it was the one taken when I had ended my degree in Cape Town and first went to Elim. Perhaps it was even before that. I

would not recognise my face now, I tell myself. Yet I stop my thoughts, I chastise myself for my paranoia. I take the ticket from her and make for the bus.

Once the bus is moving I tell myself that I am free.

I sleep through the heat of the day on the journey from Tuxtla Gutierrez east through the mountains of the Chiapas, towards San Cristobel de las Casas. The bus climbs higher into the dense forests south-west of the Lacadonian mountains. We go through several army checkpoints. At the first checkpoint my heart races as a young soldier steps onto the bus and commands us to get off. I find myself wondering what I will do; whether I will perhaps run into the thick of the forest or whether I will rush into the boy, knocking him off his feet, wrenching the rifle from his grip. It is a childish fantasy that I construct in detail in my head as I am immobilised by fear. Yet, like all of the other travellers I step off the bus and line up at the side of the road. First our bags are searched, then we must find our passports from our jackets and produce them and stand before the young soldiers and have our faces examined. I am struck by fear, made impotent by it. When the boy stands before me I avoid his eyes. When he looks carefully at my passport, I watch a point above his shoulder, a piece of the green jungle.

But it is fine. It is a pantomime to the coming of civil war. It has no order, no purpose. Information is not collected, catalogued, communicated. All that

matters is that the boy should be satisfied by his moment of authority. My sleep is broken like this every hour.

The greater evil is the one that lurks in the forests to the north. The soldiers are not concerned with domestic crime. Evil now has the name 'Marcos', a voice that one hears intermittently on the radio and television, a man with no face, he appears in interviews wearing a balaclava. Every man, he says, is extension of Marcos. Marcos cannot die. Should he die another will take his name. The Zapatistas can never die.

I return to my dreams each time I reach my seat. The plastic of the seat sticks to my skin like the skin of another and I return each time to the same moment: the alabaster skin of a girl-child, her half smirk, a mirthful ironic smile playing across her lips.

We are carried into the cool thin air of the mountains. The landscape is fecund and dense. We have left behind the barren plains of Mexico.

13

We arrive in San Cristobel de las Casas in the early evening and turn off the Pan American Highway onto Rio Insurgentes, the bus winding its way up a long cobble-stoned street towards the zocalo. As we move through the criss-cross of streets I stare out the window at the beauty of the town. The roofs of the houses are black-tiled, the windows are shuttered and protected by ornate bars, the

churches are painted in bright primary colours. The doorways of the buildings are lit by nineteenth-century gas lamps. Each building is two stories, an ornate doorway, above which is built a tiny wrought-iron balcony. The Indian men and women beg on the streets. The women are wearing long multi-coloured shawls tightly wrapped around them, the men are wearing proud sombreros. As the bus stops at the edge of the zocalo I see too that the streets are packed with tourists – even with the impending war on its way – they mill about the zocalo photographing the exteriors of their hotels like flies outside a kitchen door. I search too the faces of those who look at me from the streets as we pass by slowly in the bus. I want to be anonymous, invisible. I search for the moment that I will be recognised, preparing myself for a ridiculous rush through the streets, being chased, perhaps there will be a struggle. At points there is a sense of fear, yet also there is a desire to reach this moment, a desire for the inevitability of it.

The cold air of the high mountains bites into me as I get off the bus. I find a hotel on the zocalo and go through to the restaurant. I am dishevelled and unwashed but the maitre de seats me at a table with a white linen tabecloth and I eat a hot soup with silver cutlery. I sit through two seatings at my table at the window and drink steadily and methodically. The waiters turn on the television after the second seating has left. There are a few tourists who sit at the bar and I watch the endless recurrence of the news on television. It is thought that three hundred villagers died in the Chiapas during the recent attack by the Zapatistas.

They interview Salinas and then cut back to the forests, three men standing with rifles, hooded in balaclavas. Then there is a piece on the NAFTA treaty and an interview with the director of a shipping company based in San Diego. He says that the treaty will be good for business in America, but that the Mexicans will have to raise the standards of their goods. I wonder briefly, absurdly, whether Catherine's face will appear on the screen, whether it will haunt me. Perhaps the tourists at the bar will lift their heads in interest, this being close to them, the violent death of a tourist in Mexico.

I sleep in a massive wooden bed a dreamless sleep, the clear air of the mountains drawing out of me my turmoil.

Perhaps this place will be safe, I tell myself. I imagine living in this town, walking from my small hotel each day through the zocalo to buy bread and cheese and chorizo, even coming to know these Indian beggars by name. When the Zapatistas come down from the mountains I will join with them and don a balaclava and swear allegiance to Marcos and live on tree roots and plundered vegetables. I laugh at this. I laugh at myself, lying in my bed, at the absurdity of these thoughts, and I am ashamed at the sound that I make in my empty room, a sound that is empty.

Through the next day I walk around the town, carefully avoiding looking at people, keeping my eyes to the ground. I go into the high churches, visit the tiny museums that are hidden within the maze of buildings. Each building is a world

unto itself, a corridor that opens up into an interior courtyard and a square veranda with distinct rooms; in one room a tiny coffee shop, in another a series of Mayan artifacts; in another sits a family of Indians who stare back at me.

In an artists' studio I find a small theatre where a film is just beginning. I pay a young American woman two pesos and sit down on an old school chair in front of a video screen amongst ten or so other tourists. The film is a documentary. A small comfortable room with couches, shot in the seventies. There are four people, a man who begins speaking about Hieronymous Bosch, his thick hair curling at the sides over his spectacles, and three students, two women and a man. There is a frequent cut to one of the women who is attractive with a pale complexion. She wears a disturbing red lipstick and long black hair flows across her shoulders. She holds a cigarette at its very end along the yellow filter.

The teacher talks slowly about Hieronymous Bosch. He describes the triptych, he explains why Bosch worked with more freedom in the Hell panel than in either of the other two panels, Purgatory or Heaven. He explains that there is no distinction between the sexes, between emotions, between good and evil. For example, here is a naked man being kissed by a pig in a nun's costume, or a nun who looks like a pig kissing this naked man. The expression on the man's face is inscrutable, neither distinctly ecstatic nor terrified. The objects of the panel are all linked in some way but there is no reference point, no perspective.

'In this way,' the teacher says, 'the work expresses freedom.'

Here is a large bird ingesting a naked man. We can see that this bird is excreting a sack filled with men of a reduced size. The sack will fall into a pit, a pit that is surrounded by naked men, each of them excreting in some way or another, but all with a perfectly natural expression on their faces. One man seems to be excreting circular objects that may be eggs or gold coins.

'There is no distinction,' he says.

At one point the woman whose face is pale with the red lipstick stands up revealing her long slim legs. She strolls over to behind the speaker's chair to look over his shoulder and see for herself the scene of Hell that he is describing.

'There are seven orifices on the human body,' he is saying, 'and they are all represented in Bosch's work. Only one orifice distinguishes men from women and it is the least revealed.'

She peers over his shoulder and then says, 'Show me the seven orifices.'

He proceeds with the exercise, revealing all but the last. 'Bosch had trouble with the male genitals,' he laughs and then his students laugh and then there is a rustle through the theatre.

The Bosch film is replaced by another, a film on Leonardo da Vinci, his precise drawings of the human body. I leave in the middle – an image of blood vessels and muscle attachments in perfect symmetric detail – and go out into the street which is now overcast by dark low cloud.

In a restaurant on Rio Cuauhtemoc I meet a Mexican archeologist who has returned from a trip to Palenque.

'The most fascinating of the early linguists,' he tells me, 'was de Landa. A Jesuit priest and a brutal man. Virtually through the torture of his subjects he began to unravel the Mayan language.'

He has begun to speak to me out of nowhere, perhaps because I am the only tourist in the restaurant, or perhaps because he sees the book I have picked up at a store, a history of the Mayans. He invites himself to my table. He has a head of black woollen hair, a face of stubble, puffed-out cheeks.

'You are going to Palenque?' he insists.

'I may go there.'

'Palenque is very special,' he says. 'You know what it means, Palenque?'

'No.'

'It is named after King Pakal. Imagine him, a club-footed king. The Mayans drew him in hieroglyph as a sun and a shield. Do you know why Palenque is special?' he asks.

'No.'

'It has to do with clay. With clay and tree bark. This way the images could be made to dry more slowly. That is why Palenque is special. There is more detail. Where are you from?' he asks suddenly. 'Your accent is strange.'

'From South Africa.'

'Ah. South Africa. I read about it. It sounds very interesting. We too in Mexico had a similar system to yours. If you were Spanish then you were nobility. You see me,' he insists, moving his face forward towards me, running his fingers across his rough skin, 'you see I have facial hair. You see my nose, it is a European nose. You see my eyes, they are blue.'

'Yes. They are blue,' I tell him.

'But that child. Look at that child,' and he twists around to point at an Indian family who are begging on the street, at a small Indian boy in a shawl who stands forlorn a little way off from his mother. She is crouched into the doorway of the building. 'That child will never grow up to have facial hair. He will have the Mayan nose. The skin over his eyes will be pulled like this. He will grow up to be of the lowest caste. He will be despised. In this country he will be weaker than others.'

'I must go,' I tell him.

'You are a tourist,' he says, touching my hand with his massive hand. 'But you are different. I am a good judge of character and I tell you that you are different. Your eyes are old. You have a young man's body, but your eyes are old.'

'I must go,' I tell him once again, rising from the table.

'You believe in death?' he asks sharply.

I pull my hand from his but sit down again with my back against the chair, staring at him.

'If you believe that death is the end of life, then you will not understand. But it is true. It is true that you lived before and you will live after. Before you were a very old man. You died an old man and you have kept his eyes. There is a word in English to describe this, but I cannot remember. It is easiest to say that you have cynical eyes. You have seen everything. Nothing can touch you.'

14

My geography: a series of steep valleys and mountain passes, grey forboding cloud insinuated into the rugged landscape; and my hands in my lap that I stare at, my body jostled by the rocky motions of the bus.

Another bus journey, moving further east, moving away. Outside San Cristobel there are army bunkers built at either side of the highway. They face east, towards the inscrutable forested mountains. The soldiers are expectant, nervous.

Now, in the mountains, there is only the odd army truck that we pass or another bus heading west. I imagine our bus as the sole vessel heading towards an Inferno. I try to imagine the constitution of this Inferno, its heat the stifling heat of jungle, its flames the leaves of ferns, stretching out to catch at one's flesh, its torture the torture of agonizing time waiting for movement to continue. We pick up each and every man that waits at the side of the road until the bus is loaded even in the aisles. When we pass the police blocks the driver instructs the

people in the aisles to crouch down – we would be stopped if we were overloaded. I give up my seat finally under the hard gaze of a fat Indian woman and stand the remaining four hours to the town of Palenque.

Then another wait, standing on the side of the road hitching in the dark to the Mayabell campsite, a place I read about in a travel guide. It is now midnight and my muscles ache from the exhaustion of the journey. But it is not long before I am picked up by a one-ton truck that is ferrying travellers to Palenque Ruinas, about ten kilometres outside of the town. I calculate in my head the young driver's profit. If he picks up four traveller's each journey and makes four or five journeys a day – I pay him the five pesos outside a set of houses that look like horse stalls.

Behind these stalls, which I discover to be ablution blocks, I find an open patch of grass upon which is built a series of palapas, simple square blocks of concrete, four wooden poles set in the concrete and roofed over with thatch. I pay another ten pesos to a young Mexican boy and I am allowed to hang my hammock across two poles. I climb into my hammock and attempt sleep. But I am too tired for sleep. I listen to the faint sound of a guitar from another of the palapas. I turn to watch the silhouette of the figures around a small fire that burns beside the palapa. Three or four figures sitting in a circle singing and chanting, one playing the guitar, another with a finger drum, an inconstant sound that keeps me from sleep.

I walk up the scar of a sand road that has been cut through the ancient jungle in a broad rugged sweep. I enter the realm of the ruins of Palenque by a path that breaks out of the claustrophobia of the jungle onto a grass plain, revealing a series of stone temples, a throng of tourists milling about an ancient forecourt. Between the temples are the broken stone bodies of massive idols that have long ago fallen to the ground. The slow Spanish drawl of the tour guides and the chatter of children fill the open space. I turn suddenly at the sharp sound of a clap – a young woman hoping to hear an echo. I move between the early morning shadows of the temples, strange rhomboid shapes constructed across the grass. I follow a set of stone steps up onto the raised platform of a temple. The stone is lichen-covered. Where once there had been broken gaps in the edifice of the temple, there is now the restoration of monochromatic concrete.

Then the first drops of rain. The plaster edifices of Mayan hieroglyph begin to show yellow-brown in the shifting light. As the rain comes down more heavily I manage to find in the temple a room to myself. I find a porthole low in the wall. A breeze of fresh air rushes through and there is the excruciating drip of water from a millennium-old fault between the stone blocks of a wall. I begin to feel that I must escape into the rain, but I force myself to examine on one wall a large Mayan glyph, cut through by a weed-covered crack that runs diagonally from the stone floor. I examine the figures, their two-dimensional perspective, their complex activities. They are inscrutable, these images. It is not clear

whether the leaders are benevolent or fascist as their extended arms are raised over the subjects.

One carved figure is the pronounced profile of a Mayan head – regal and arrogant with a rigid nose lifted to the sky. There is a woven cap with a resplendent tail stitched to the back of the head. The figure wears a heavy necklace. Above the head is the face of the sun, staring out stupidly, like a child's sunflower. The arms of the figure are crossed over his swollen stomach. One of the figure's eyes is visible, the other hidden in the imagination of the stone, and is cut from his brow so that the stare is open and sickening, like the glare of a blind man. His lips are pouted. His hands are feminine, delicate. He seems powerful, content. His face is lit by the vague yellow glow of the sun that is beginning to emerge. In the increasing light he takes on the expression of one who is waiting, eternally expectant.

From Palenque Ruinas, days later, I take a bus to the town and stand for two hours in a queue waiting to change traveller's cheques. Outside in the street a young man, a fresh-faced boy stands with a shotgun. He is dressed in the blue overalls of the police and wears a bullet-proof vest. I meet an American who talks about the Grateful Dead for an hour. It has begun to become fascinating to me, that I have not yet been recognised, that I have travelled from Puerto Escondido, through several states, without having been stopped.

As the American speaks I watch the clock on the wall. I watch the second hand tick. The clock is emblazoned with the Mayan calender. The hand, on an old spring, shudders imperceptibly at each movement. The American is describing Denver, Colorado, from where he comes.

The cashier examines my passport and looks back up at me. Again, for a second, I have a pang of fear that pierces through me. Her eyes seem cold – I turn mine away from her. I change all the money I have. I now have pesos which I will change again at the Guatemalan border into quezales.

From Palenque I catch a bus to Zapata, about forty kilometres due east. This way I will avoid the Huehuetenango border which is more popular. From Zapata I take a bus to Tenosique. The road leads towards distant hills. We cross grazing land. I am the only gringo. The Mexicans in the bus pretend that I am not there, a gringo this far from the main routes. In Tenosique, on a wide road, above which there stand huge advertising banners – Gallo cerveza and Delicados cigarillos – I wait for half an hour before catching a taxi to La Palma, the border of Mexico on the Rio San Pedro. I have mapped my journey now – this route will take me into the north of Guatemala, and from there on towards Tikal and then on towards Honduras. Perhaps I will go to the Mosquito Coast or perhaps further south towards Nicaragua. This is the constitution of my thoughts – a map by which I escape Mexico, a choreographed route that I have constructed from guide books, the activity of escape now all-consuming.

The taxi, a van filled with Mexican men and myself, stops on the verge of the road at a crossing. To the east runs a dirt road which had once been tarred.

'Mas o menos five hours,' the driver tells me, making walking motions with his hands.

I get out. I watch the van move away and then I am absolutely alone on the edge of the road. I stand for hours. At times I believe I hear the sound of an engine that comes from the west. I turn and peer into the sun which has begun to reach for the horizon. I avert my eyes or shield them with an arm and still my body and concentrate to hear once more that sound. I hear nothing, only the murmuring of the wind through the fields of grass on the flat plain. I touch the skin of my arms, feeling for the dry texture of sunburn. At points images conjure themselves up before my eyes and I realise that I must concentrate on the movements of the grass – I must guard my mind against memory.

Another sound. I ignore the engine valiantly, too often have I been made a fool of. Yet it comes across the tar road and I wait for it and pray it will turn onto the dust and I am rewarded for the driver stops and asks where I am going.

'La Palma,' I tell him.

He looks down at me and nods slowly, as if to say that in this there is more that is meant. 'Para Guatemala?' he asks.

'Si,' I tell him, and he motions me into the cab of the truck.

He explains to me that he delivers food to La Palma, that it is very dangerous at the moment, *muy peligroso*. Because of the rebels, he says. Because it is the

rebels who want more land, who have lived in the mountains all their lives and who now want to take the land from the rancheros, the honest farmers.

'Why you go this way?' he asks.

'It is interesting,' I answer.

He nods again, his bovine face fixed ahead. He seems content not to talk but fiddles with the radio which keeps losing reception. He curses briefly then sighs, turning back to conversation.

'Que pienso sobre Mexico,' he asks absurdly.

'Muy bonita,' I tell him.

'No,' he says. 'Esta es muy fue. It is an ugly country. Too many bandidos. Too many men.'

15

In the early evening, after an hour of driving, he drops me at the dead end of a potholed road that breaks a kilometre back from the sand road. He waits patiently as I gather my bag and smiles for the first time as I thank him.

'Aqui,' he says, pointing at a row of houses that stand on stilts at the edge of the river. 'There is a boat tomorrow.'

'Donde esta un hotel?' I ask.

'No hay,' he answers, concerned.

'It's ok,' I tell him, for the first time feeling that my headache is going, feeling light. Finally I am at the border of Guatemala. I will cross the border tomorrow and I will be in another country, free of Mexico.

I walk down to the river and I am surrounded suddenly by mosquitoes. Sitting at the edge of the river, I make out, silhouetted by the iron red of the setting sun, the figure of a naked girl swimming in the river. She is standing in the shallows under a broken concrete bridge which has a split in its middle. When she notices me she dashes out of the water and grabs at her clothes, pulling her skirt around her. She is at the opposite bank to mine and begins to run up the mud hill of the bank.

With my eyes fixed on her I begin to feel the first pangs of desire and then, before I am able to stop it, the image of the other girl returns. This time the river is blood-red, the puddles of water that are caught in pockets between river-smoothed rocks bleed into the mud. The stone that I pick from the bank is smooth to touch – I caress its texture as if it were flesh. I imagine the young Mexican girl's flesh being kneaded by my fingers, the ridges of her spine like a rosary beneath her skin. I would count that rosary with my thumbs, praying at her coccyx, at her neck. Her breasts I would cover with the cups of my hands, her mouth with my mouth. But I cannot get the blood out of the image, it laps at her feet as we stand together on the mud of the riverbank.

If I concentrate long enough, sitting still, pulling my shoulders forward, and tuck in my head, I can sit through this wave of anguish. In Guatemala, I tell

myself, I will be free. In Guatemala I will purge myself of desire, I will live like a Jesuit priest on the Mosquito Coast, I will read history, collect plants and catalogue them, touch the heads of the Indian children briefly with a paternalistic hand.

I find a small restaurant with two tables on a platform perched on stilts over the river. The proprietor tells me that the boat will leave tomorrow, pointing at the long wood canoes that are beached a few metres from the jetty. At the rear of each is a ten-horsepower engine. I ask him about hotels, a place to sleep.

'Aqui,' he tells me, pointing out the hammock tied to the roof of the platform. 'Cinco pesos.'

'How long is the boat journey?' I ask him.

'Quartro horas,' he says. 'Half Mexico, half Guatemala.'

'You leave tomorrow?' I insist.

'Si,' he tells me impatiently.

Later the girl comes in, his daughter. She is perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old, avoids looking at me. He sits down at my table and orders her to fetch us coffee. He seems interested in travellers, he wants to know where I am from, what I have been doing in Mexico. I want to tell him: at night this river will turn to blood, these wooden stilts will become stained a dark red, that a breeze will come across the river's surface, sending small waves slapping onto the deck.

'You are from British?' he asks.

'No,' I tell him, rising from the chair. 'I am from Elim.'

'Que?' he says.

The girl arrives with the coffee. He watches me to see whether I am watching her, whether my eyes will follow her. The river becomes black as light finally dissipates; now there is an island upon which we sit, this small wooden reverie stuck out like a fist into the flesh of the river.

Later I must drink with him. He gets the girl to bring out a bottle of gin. He drinks straight from the bottle, begins to get drunk.

'El Dios vive en el cielo,' he tells me, motioning firmly with his arms. 'El diablo vive en el infierno.'

He stands up then, the wooden chair falling over hard behind him, the girl comes running across the deck to pick it up.

'Entiendo,' he insists.

'I understand,' I tell him.

'El malo va para el infierno. Entiendo.'

The bottle is empty. He calls the girl back. When she gives him a new bottle, he takes her by the arm, pulls her towards him.

'Ella es mi hija,' he says. 'My daughter. Muy guapa, no?'

'Si.'

'You want marry her?' he says. 'You want her? Quieres?'

The girl twists her face away to stare at the black river. She is now sitting on his lap, his heavy arms around her, his hands searching her. Finally she manages to wrench herself from him, sprinting across the deck.

Later, in the middle of the dark night, as he is sleeping in a couch on the verandah of the house bordering the river, from which the wood pier and deck emerge, I stand over him and watch him. He breathes with difficulty, coughing intermittently, his mouth spluttering. In the room where the girl sleeps, a tiny room at the back of the house, there is no window. In the pitch black I listen to her breathe. At points the pace of her breath quickens, it sounds as if she shudders, twists among her sheets.

I go back out across the deck, alive, awake.

The water laps at the side of the canoe in a regular motion, transfixing me. The river is wide, low banks at each side breaking from mud into sparse vegetation. We travel in the centre of the waters.

Two boats have set out for the border, three tourists and one pilot in each. There are two Swiss men, an Australian, and a couple from Germany. German is spoken between the boats. The pilot of the boat in which I travel remains silent, his eyes slanted half-closed.

We each step gingerly from the canoes onto a wooden deck. The Mexicans remain in the boats, clutching onto the black plastic piping that rims the edge of the deck. There are no ropes. Now the buzz of the engines have gone, there is only left the lap of the river, the sound of foreign voices.

We must carry our bags to the small brick building that is set some way from the bank. Irregular stones are spaced in a line across the mud flat separating the river from the low vegetated hills so that one may walk across. The director of the post has to be woken by his soldier. He comes slouching through into the waiting room, glances at the six gringos, and sighs.

Passports are handed in first, the bags are searched through by the youth. I stand at the small window of the room and stare out at the river.

When the search is complete, the soldier goes through to his director's office. We watch, the six of us, as the soldier comes back out, shutting the door behind him. He seems not to know what to do.

'Senor Fuentes says Ok,' he tells us.

In his hand are the passports. We are not sure if he will return them to us or if we should go to fetch them. Eventually the Australian strides across to him and pulls his from the pile.

'Gracias,' he says sarcastically.

The Germans get theirs, then the Swiss. The young soldier is left standing in the room, facing me, his hands empty.

'Where is my passport?' I ask him. Outside I can hear one of the engines getting started, its choking splutter, then finally a high-pitched sound as the fuel breaks through.

'Que?' the soldier says, his face blank, almost frightened.

'Donde esta mi passaporte?' I ask more sternly.

'Senor Fuente tiene.'

'Porque?'

'Yo no se,' he says.

Now the second engine has got started. The canoe with the German couple has left its mooring and has set off slowly towards the deeper reaches of the river. A low bank of weather has begun to emerge from the west, from the Mexico side. The Swiss are seated in the second canoe, three pairs of hands holding on to the edge of the wooden deck.

'Andale,' I hear a voice shout for me as the Mexican comes hopping across the stones, across the mud bank.

I turn back to the soldier, then brush past him into the director's office. The man raises his head, his ear to the receiver of the telephone. Casually he raises his hand to hold me at the door. When I insist, he closes a hand over the mouthpiece.

'Que?' he says, almost boredly.

'I want my passport,' I tell him.

'Hay una problema,' he says. 'There is a problem. You must wait.'

'Why?'

'I phone now,' he says. 'There is a problem. They say you must wait.'

Outside the Mexican is shouting for me, swearing in Spanish. When I go to the door the soldier lifts his arm across it.

'We cannot wait,' the Mexican shouts from the mud flat. He stands with his arms in the air. He wants to emphasise that he is forlorn. I see him turn carefully on his rock, aware of the mud beneath him.

When I go to my pack, which is still lying on the floor of the waiting room, the young soldier again blocks my way. I laugh out aloud at him quite suddenly, and he steps back, a hand to his holster.

The director comes charging out, shouts at the youth, gathers his English before speaking to me.

'You. You must sit down. You must wait. They say to me on the phone you must wait.'

Over his voice there is the last faint sounds of the ten-horsepower engines going up the river.

I wait.

PART TWO

1

Today we buried a child. Her grave was dug during the service that was held in the Church. While I ascended the altar and spoke, two men that we hired from the Le Roux farm opened the lock to the Church shed, found the spades, and began to dig in the cemetery behind the school. The day being hot, they wiped their foreheads. Perhaps they leant on their spades after the work had been done, waiting for the procession that would meet them.

The children were brought into the Church first, the nurses shepherding them in, seating them in the front pews. After each of the children had been accounted for the local farm labourers and their wives came in and sat at the back. I read from 1 Corinthinians 13. The reading was perfunctory, it touched no-one. The children did not weep, not understanding the meaning of the ceremony. As I spoke they stared at me in the blank forlorn manner in which they stare at me each Sunday, beyond the grasp of my words. Some fidgeted and cried out and once or twice one of the nurses came forward up the aisle to tend to them. One child began to cry out aloud incomprehensibly and could not be comforted, having to be taken back to the wards.

Neither did the local farmhands or their wives weep, not knowing the child we buried. Only that she was one of the many children who are looked after at the mission, one of the children they see through the mission fence, or whom they see on a Sunday. Yet they sat respectfully through the service, waiting for

my reading to end, waiting for the psalms to be sung, some even following the procession out into the blinding sun.

In this way the mission shares its Church with the locals. The white farmers and their wives will go to Bredasdorp on a Sunday. They drive the half-hour's drive north to sit in the more impressive Dutch Reformed Church, underneath its high ceiling, in its clinical atmosphere. It is only the black labourers, the farmhands, who join us in our Moravian Church, who are satisfied with the plaster peeling from the wall, the drainage stains on its bleak exterior.

After my words, after a long silence as we waited for the first to move, we followed the coffin out into the sun and walked on the sand road, in the dust, towards the cemetery. We met there the two men who had dug the grave. We set the coffin down. Four black straps were pulled beneath the girth of the coffin. The men carried the coffin across the maw of the grave, balancing themselves on the wood sleepers set across its length and then they lowered the coffin, teetering, into the grave.

In front of the coffin I spoke once again. There was a silence after that, another period of waiting, until one of the men spat into his hands, rubbing them together, before lifting heavily the sleeper from its straddling across the grave. The other repeated the act, so that the pit of the grave was now inaccessible, the coffin now on the other side of its mouth. The first spadefuls of earth fell onto the wood of the coffin with a hollow sound.

2

The police from Bredasdorp come to Elim on the day that the child is first discovered and after this almost every day for several weeks. There is one day soon after the discovery of the girl that a Superintendent visits from Cape Town. He interviews the nurses and the nuns and various of the locals. He sits in an office of the schoolroom behind the desk and it is my job then to call in each of the nurses, one at a time. The Superintendent asks that I wait outside.

'It is easier for them to speak this way,' he tells me.

An hour goes by as each of the nurses and the young intern and the locals brought in by the detectives go through the schoolroom towards their confessions, to the small unused office in which we store all of the children's drawings and carvings. The children seem vaguely to pick up the mystique of the procession, staring at the schoolroom door of which the sun has now made a white obelisk, waiting for whomever will next appear.

I am called in myself once again and I expect that it is now my turn, that they have kept me for last, but the Superintendent has only begun.

'It is necessary,' he tells me, 'for us to speak with the children.'

I search his face for any quiver of black humour, but I find only austerity.

'It is impossible,' I tell him, 'for any one of these children to have committed this crime.'

'With a crime of this nature,' he says, 'we can rule nothing out, we have to assume nothing.'

'These children are unable to conceive of violence. They are unable to plan violence.'

He speaks slowly, methodically: 'One of the things I have learnt over the years, doctor, is that less and less is one able to predict human behaviour.'

'I will not allow it,' I tell him.

The Superintendent stares at me.

'It is not my intention,' he mouths slowly, 'to upset the children any further than they have already been upset. Probably what you say is true, but my profession requires me to follow the rules of investigation.'

I begin with the oldest child. He is sitting at the front of the class and is huddled over a drawing and as I touch him on the shoulder he turns his face to me, for a long moment neither recognising me nor the origin of the disturbance. I want to say to him: do not worry, this will soon be over; but it is futile. With the Superintendent he becomes suddenly excitable, fidgeting with his hands, with the arms of the chair, twisting his body around to me, almost in the motion of a lover stretched out on a bed. He stares at me with a pained expression that is overdone, somehow attempting to accentuate the idea of his helplessness.

'Can he speak?' the Superintendent asks.

'If he wants to,' I say, 'he will speak a little Afrikaans.'

'Can the others speak?'

'Perhaps less than him.'

Hurriedly the Superintendent collects his items. The child swings his head around in fear as the chair scrapes across the old wood floor.

'I would like to inspect the washing room,' he says. 'I would like to see where she was found.'

The policemen and I move through the outside heat towards the dormitories like cattle, our eyes following the ground. I think of myself as a rabbinical leader in the temple of Jerusalem, the city now fallen, leading the Romans through the synagogue, moments before they will desecrate it.

'What is that smell?' the Superintendent asks as we enter the room.

'Proteas,' I tell him.

'Where are they?'

'Most of them we removed,' I say, 'for the graves.'

He looks at me suddenly and I can sense him about to speak, but he says nothing.

I stand in the open doorway as he looks around the room. He paces around the enamel bath that we had bolted to the centre of the floor to make the washing of the children easier. He then examines the bath – I watch his hands grip its porcelain rim. I watch as his sergeant begins to scrape the blood off its surface, now caked. The pieces that come off look like layers of burnt skin. He places them neatly in specimen plastics.

3

A Branch Captain from Bredasdorp, a Captain Van Wyk, is given the case after the Superintendent returns to Cape Town. He is a younger man, perhaps thirty-five. He has blonde hair, a receding hairline, a tyre of flesh around his stomach. He has an open face, a certain earnestness. I find that I am disturbed by his eyes, by the way that I cannot tell whether he is looking at me. I suspect that he has a slight squint, yet it is not pronounced enough to be immediately noticeable.

He comes each morning around nine o'clock up the gravel driveway in his yellow Volkswagen Fox and parks neatly in one of the bays we have demarcated with white-washed river stones. Over the course of several days he directs the investigation and the search of the mission station. His men are instructed to search for a possible weapon, an object that may have been used to strike the girl across the side of her head. It must be a blunt object, he tells his men. They comb the school and the church and the playground, and even the cemetery. They go through the nurses' rooms and the children's private lockers, discovering bits of old food and letters from parents and specimens found from the veld; dung beetles, cicadas, small river stones sculpted perfectly smooth, the petals of proteas.

Sometimes in the afternoons the Captain visits the schoolroom, nods his head briefly, and informs me of the progress of his investigation. He believes, he tells me, that the crime was committed by a vagrant, not by a local. He has a thick

Afrikaans accent and struggles over the English. Yet he seems to take a certain pride in reporting his work.

'We will find him,' he tells me confidently.

I say nothing. I see him watch me for a response, perplexed at my silence. I begin to imagine that he wonders about me, about my relation to this crime. I catch him looking at me quizzically, wondering why I am here, how I have come to be in Elim. Perhaps he thinks that I do not react enough to the child's death – that I have become used to death, immune to it. Or perhaps he thinks of me rather as austere, one of those men who go through life without friends, without people. He thinks: this quality of austerity might be intrinsic, it might have nothing to do with Elim.

'How many years have you worked here, doctor?' he asks me one morning.

'Twelve years,' I tell him.

'Before that you were a doctor in Cape Town?'

'Yes. But I had to go to Pennsylvania for three years to study.'

'Pennsylvania?'

'That is the headquarters of the Moravian Church.'

'Ah,' he says.

He wants to ask me what makes me leave Cape Town. What is it that makes me leave my work as a general practitioner, a comfortable life in Cape Town, and turn towards this strange life of humility. Or perhaps he does not see this as humility. Perhaps he sees this life as a kind of profound vanity, this altruism.

With Jason Heaney, our young doctor who is serving his year of internship with us, he has greater rapport. I watch them talk together standing outside his car before he returns each afternoon to Bredasdorp. I watch the way that they speak easily to one another, a young doctor and a young policeman who stand in the parking lot of a children's home discussing the girl. Or perhaps they discuss other things; the rugby on TV, distant pleasures in Cape Town, politics. I am unable to imagine.

I watch Captain Van Wyk pull out the driveway in his yellow policeman's car, a hand stuck out the window waving back at him.

4

This is how we find her. It is the day each year that we collect proteas in the veld; these proteas that we will lay upon the graves of the children who have died. We do this each year, a tradition that for the doctors and nurses is tiring; for the children it is a strange incomprehensible break in their routine. Some always become overly excited at leaving the confines of the mission, others become terrified. But it is part of the purpose of the mission, it is our duty.

When June had still been here, when together we had looked after the children and run the mission station, we had always cooked a meal for the nurses after the protea-picking. They would come to our cottage and June would

serve the turkey she had bought at the Pick & Pay in Bredasdorp, and the house, at least for that one day of the year, would be filled with life.

The older children, the children who are able to walk and move about on the station, who are less likely to go into a fit, or to become uncontrollable, are gathered by the nurses into our tiny prefab hall and are split into groups. Each of us, each of the doctors and matrons, take one of the groups of five or six children and we go into the veld to pick proteas. We must pick at least several proteas per grave, so as to make wreaths.

We go into the open fields of lucerne and maize that border the town, making our way towards the dried dongas, the clumps of trees that are scattered across the landscape, towards the untilled land that fosters the proteas. The skyline is a landscape of yellow maize, shimmering in the breeze with the texture of a ruffled sea. In places an island of trees is sunk into the horizon, above is a sky of pale blue. We find mud tracks, cattle tracks, that we follow until we reach a gate, unlatch the gate and go through into the next field. Scattered across this landscape, beside the gnarled exposed roots of a dead tree, in the mud hollow beside a dried-up river, on the paths that border the fields, we find proteas.

At the mission the proteas are gathered into the washroom where the children are cleaned each day. The room is floor-tiled and the walls too are tiled in white ceramic squares. Every other square is painted with the image of a paradise flycatcher, legacy to the previous director, his interest in ornithology. In the

centre of the room is the bath itself, its outside walls porcelein-tiled, its basin stained from years of use.

We fill the bath with cold water, leaving the proteas for the days before the celebration. On that day they will be made into magnificent wreaths by the nurses, tied together using fishing gut that we get from Arniston, and then we will lay the wreaths upon each grave in our children's cemetery.

This is how we find the girl. It begins with a high-pitched scream, a scream to make one's blood go cold. Several of the nurses rush towards the washroom, swinging open the double-doors to find Petra, one of our younger nurses, shaking and sobbing beside the bath. The bath itself has been emptied of the proteas, they are scattered across the tiled floor. There is a child's body in the water, her face just breaking the surface, her hair spread out in a dark halo. Her child's body has begun to turn blue. Her eyes, her incongruous bright blue eyes, are wide open, staring at the ceiling. Around her head, floating on the surface of the water, stuck to the enamel rim of the bath like colourful moths, are the petals of proteas.

5

I find myself thinking endlessly of the policeman's theory. I create scenarios, elaborate stories, that are constructed around the girl's murder. I imagine a man who walks a long way under an unforgiving sun, perhaps all the way from

Bredasdorp. I imagine that he has perhaps recently lost his job and is wandering aimlessly across the bleak maize fields that make up the land of this coast. He asks a farmer for work, but is turned down. It must first rain in order for there to be work. He is one of those men one sees on the highways, far from any town or petrol station, simply walking.

When he finds Elim he finds dilapidated council houses in neat rows, eroded dirt roads scarred by erosion, an old Church. Perhaps a woman raises her head from the stoep of her house, her hands busy with washing. Behind the church he finds a fence and a gate, through which he makes his way up a gravel drive. He is interested in what lies behind this fence, in what might be enclosed within this sparse landscape. Perhaps he does not think that he will find food elsewhere in the town. He is surprised therefore when he finds that the door to the building is unlocked. It does not make sense, to have the high fences and then to leave the buildings unprotected. In the foyer of the building he hears strange sounds from behind the doors. He believes that he may be in a hospital, he can smell the clinical odour of formalin. On the walls are crayon drawings that children have made. He steps through the hall and goes down a corridor. He becomes certain that he is in a hospital; he finds metal trays, a drip, even a stethoscope.

Yet there are no doctors or nurses. He finds only the distorted bodies of children. They lie catatonic on their beds, some connected to machines, others whose eyes roll, others who are tied down with bandages wrapped around their sheets. Some are by degrees more conscious than others. There is one room

where the bodies are completely sedated, they may as well be dead, yet there is another where the children move about, their heads turning on their pillows as he enters the room, their mouths emitting strange sounds.

In order for the Captain's theory to be plausible it is necessary that chance brings this man to Elim on the day that we collect proteas from the veld. It is necessary too that he enters the mission when we are out in the veld. He must find a building filled with demented children. He must feel that he is entering Pandemonium, that the offspring of its cohorts have been left in the furnace of the prefab buildings we had mounted on concrete, while a war had been waged against God.

Is it plausible that he is not terrified at what he finds? Why does he not rush out of the building, only to be pursued in his nightmares by the sights he has seen? Perhaps he is afraid, yet he is also hungry. Or perhaps he is not afraid, merely curious. In one room he finds a girl whose eyes are blue. She is lying on a bed and is strapped down at her ankles and chest by bandages and she is wide awake. She watches him unblinkingly as he approaches her bed. Briefly her head twists to the side then back again. He approaches cautiously, struck by her eyes that hold his gaze.

What then? What quality does she have that makes it necessary for him to unwrap those bandages, to take her body from the bed? Does he carry her in his arms, as one would carry one's bride across a threshhold? Does he first touch her tenderly, stroking his rough hands across her child flesh? Does she cry out in

anguish, terrified by his presence, by his smell which is new to her, or does she think of him no differently to the way she thinks of the nurses?

What is certain, this fact which anchors the story, is that he takes her outside, out into the sun. The Captain's insistence on an autopsy reveals this fact that her feet and ankles, her calves and even one side of her buttocks have been scratched by the sharp stones of the gravel drive. One must think of him at this moment dragging her across the drive, perhaps because she has now become terrified, is thrashing around, becoming increasingly manic. Yet, in full daylight, in the middle of a quiet town on the Agulhas Coast, he is able to take her out of the confines of the mission, down to a river bed – this fact is confirmed by the nature of the mud that is found on her clothing – is there able to rape her. Does she cry out now, her body no longer under her control? Surely she experiences immense pain. Surely her mania – for she had been a manic child – has reached a point of terrifying intensity.

And then, when this is over, when this man has been sated, why does he carry her back to the mission, why does he make this decision, take this risk? Is she now exhausted, does he carry her over his shoulder like a sack of meal, or does she continue to thrash about? What motivates him to take her into the washroom, into a room that is now filled with the sharp sweet odour of the proteas that have just been left in the bath by the nurses? During the time that he is raping her they must have returned, for she is found in this bath of proteas, yet why does he return to this building filled now with doctors and nurses? And

what is it that finally sets his mind to murder her? He strikes her head with a heavy object, or perhaps he knocks her head against the tiled walls, or perhaps she has already been struck by a river-smoothed stone that he has picked up out of the mud of the river bed, and then, as she is in a state of half-consciousness, he drowns her. Does she drown alone after she is struck, not able to hold her face above the surface of the water, or does he hold her head down, watching her gasp mouthfuls of water? Does he watch her die? Does he leave down the gravel drive, or does he cross over the fence behind the schoolroom?

This is only one scenario. In all its variations it makes up the mystery which begins to eat at the sanity of the mission. I notice over the weeks that follow the girl's death the nurses' growing unhappiness, their weariness. An argument will break out over the cleaning of a bedpan, or the changing of the sheets of the beds. No longer is there the busy chatter of the matrons as they smoke in the shade outside the prefab hostels, no longer do the nurses sing softly to the children as they bathe them in the enamel bath. They are used to death, these women who work in Elim, but there is now the element of violence that has insinuated itself into its atmosphere.

6

One evening I have dinner with the young intern. I invite him on the premise that we will discuss some of the cases that have come in over the past few

months, but really it is an opportunity for me to get to know him. He accepts graciously, offering to bring a salad perhaps. I smile back at him. I smile at our civilised exchange. I tell him it is no matter, that the maid will help me with the preparations for the meal. I tell him only to bring some of the files of the children he has been assigned.

It is uncomfortable between us in my house – once we are out of the wards we do not have the purpose that the children give us. He sits in the old leather couch June and I had brought with us from our home in Mowbray, and as he speaks I marvel at his eyes, at the age in them.

I think to myself: if one were to entertain the idea of the cyclical notion of life, of the soul reappearing in the body of a child, of a constant yearning and moving towards an enlightened state, then this young doctor would have died before, an old wise man.

We eat at the kitchen table, perched on stools. I feel for a moment embarrassed with the state of my home but I convince myself it is no bother to him. As we eat I ask him how he is finding his time in Elim, how he chose to come here. He answers obliquely, passing off the information as if it were irrelevant. He seems not interested in the history of things, of the way things come to happen. I wonder that it does not bother him, to have completed his studies at Groote Schuur and then to find himself stuck in a tiny Moravian village on the Agulhas peninsula, tending to damaged children.

We both avoid the subject of the little girl. We eat the curry, the one which June used to make so much more successfully, and end dinner watching television, an old Hollywood musical, *Oklahoma*. Neither of us mention the files he has brought with him that he has laid at the edge of the dining table. We sit silently in front of the television. It is sad to watch the actors speak so richly, with so much verve, so sincerely.

As we talk later on, sitting in the living room, the night outside now quiet but for the shrill sound of crickets, I realise how serious he is, somehow austere, as if he were burdened with a profound knowledge. At some point he goes to the cabinet and picks up the framed photograph of June.

'How did she die?' he asks.

I am surprised by the question. He should not even know, I think to myself, that she is dead.

'About four years ago,' I say. 'She died in a car accident, on the way back from Cape Town. She had been visiting her mother.'

He continues to stare at the photograph, not moving. I imagine that he is trying to find in the photograph the fact of her death, as if into the photograph would be written her fate.

'She was thirty-four,' I add blithely, watching him at the cabinet. 'I was forty.'

He finally turns around.

'You are a doctor,' he says. 'But you are also a pastor.'

'Yes.'

'You found God.'

Again, I am certain that there is a touch of cynicism in the way he articulates his words, as if he were suppressing a sneer.

'Yes,' I tell him.

'Why here?'

'My wife and I were involved in the struggle,' I tell him, for a moment wincing at how he must hear that word, at how he must hear the futile naivete in it.

'In Elim?'

'We wanted to help in some way. For many years this was the only place where black children who were mentally disturbed could come. It seemed the easiest way to help.'

Later I open a bottle of cognac that I have kept for an occasion that never came, a child, a home. I watch us from a point on the wall as we drink – we seem like two well-educated aristocratic gentlemen in a corner of some private club, sitting across from each other at a table in silence, drinking methodically. His skin which had seemed so smooth and young begins to appear old. Soon I am wishing that he would go.

He leaves sometime after twelve. As he turns at the door to go, he says, 'I am sorry for your loss.'

For a moment I think that he means the girl, as if she were my own child. I stare back at his sincerity, and then I think of June.

7

I wake today under a heavy sense of claustrophobia. For no reason I become annoyed with one of the young maids from the village who comes to collect my washing. I watch her movements as she bends down to collect my clothes from the floor – since June's death I have lost the habits of tidiness that one learns in marriage. I can sense that she knows I am watching her; she moves slowly, nervously.

'Hoekom is jy so stadig?' I snap at her.

She says nothing, but leaves quickly, shutting the door carefully behind her.

I sit at the edge of the bed with my head in my hands. I spend a few minutes in the dormitories before walking out into the sun, then down towards the gate, somehow carried along, not knowing where to go. The dome of the cloudless sky seems close and impending.

I think I walk halfway to Arniston under the inconstant sun – fleecy clouds beginning to appear out of nowhere. I am picked up finally by a bakkie that comes past in the opposite direction. The driver is a big burly Afrikaner, a lucerne farmer, who seems not to trust my English accent. We speak about his lucerne, the weather.

'Daar's niks wat a man kan doen,' he says wistfully. 'Die Here is nie gelukkig nie.'

He drops me near the schoolroom with the children just coming out of class, but I do not have the heart to meet them. I go out again past the rows of stone houses with the undernourished dogs yapping at my heels, and the women, wringing their washing in plastic tubs at their feet, staring after me. I find myself wandering towards June's grave. I stop at a cattle grid, doubled over with a pain shooting through my abdomen, breaking out into a cold sweat.

Walking back along the dusty road, past the devastated white stone houses, the pain comes over once again in an awful wave. A woman comes out from her stoep to help me and half-carries me back to the mission. As the nurses lay me down, the woman takes off her cap and curtsies.

'Dankie baas,' she says.

8

There is little news from Van Wyk. He calls once more to say that he will be coming through in the next few days. He says that he has not yet arrested anyone.

'It is difficult,' he says. 'This country is now full of criminals.'

I spend days in my bed trying to recover from my sudden illness. The pain in my stomach does not go away, it pierces through me in unpredictable urges. I

have begun to feel weaker, I have begun not to eat. It is a pain that has slowly grown into me, almost sinister in its machinations. It begins in the late mornings, like a rumour it hints what will be coming. Then, at some point, perhaps as I am lifting a child, it will hit me suddenly, a sharp knife going straight through me. I have begun to hate the pain as if it were a person.

Lying alone in bed I have leisure to allow despair to overcome me. I spend time thinking of June. For once I do nothing to cut off thoughts of her. I see clearly her face. I touch her skin which is the skin of my arm. I touch her hair which is my hair. The memory of a moment on the promenade at Sea Point: walking with her, she making a face at a child who is being pushed in a pram, the child giggling. I see her as she is packing the car to go back to Cape Town, to see her mother who is dying. I hear her mother's voice, the voice of a dying woman who has learnt that her daughter is dead – deep heaving sobs – and I am hating myself for telling her.

The girl too enters my thoughts and dreams uninvited. She had a beautiful pale grey-brown face with unusual blue eyes. She was always silent until suddenly excited. Something would catch her attention, a toy, a face, and she would begin then her sound, her throat an instrument for her devastating cry. It would begin as a whimper, then become more insistent. It had one pitch, one tone, but it always suggested that it might suddenly rise into a scream. The other children were afraid of her. She would stare at them, at the nurses, at myself, with those blue eyes, never blinking.

This is what we discover from her file that I find in the old rusted cabinet in my office, the file I had had to hand over to Van Wyk. That, six years ago, when she had been only five years old, she had been brought by a doctor from Stellenbosch to the mission, that her mother had shortly before died of tuberculosis, that her father had worked on a wine farm for eight years. That he had been abusive. For a coloured girl like her there had been little choice other than Elim.

As for me the pain is becoming unbearable. The nurses bring me my breakfast, lunch and dinner which I do not eat and make no comment other than to wish me better health. There are moments I imagine them looking at me almost quizzically, this behaviour strange to them, this sudden weakness exhibited by the dominee, this man who hardly speaks to them, who issues only stern commands in the wards.

One morning Jason comes in and suggests I see a doctor in Cape Town.

'I can look after things while you are gone,' he says.

'It's impossible,' I tell him. 'The summer is on its way, we have to fix the geysers, we have to order new beds, there are several children on the backlog that we need to begin testing.'

'If you don't go now, it may just get worse.'

'There is no time.'

'There will be less time in a month. You are very ill. You need to have tests done. It may only get worse.'

'With the child ...' I stammer. 'I cannot go now. Van Wyk is still investigating the child's murder. I need to be here at this time.'

'The child is gone,' he says quietly. 'You are only getting weaker.'

9

The doctor I see in Cape Town first takes blood tests, then tells me to return in a few days. I book into a hotel opposite the Cape Town planetarium, within walking distance of the City Park Hospital. Although the weather is warm, I do little but sit in my room watching television. This behaviour I recognise to be the first symptoms of a depression – this inactivity, this desire not to interact. I telephone Elim frequently to inquire about the children, Jason insisting that things are running smoothly.

On one clear day I walk through the Gardens past the parliament buildings and drink coffee in a place on Long Street. I buy some books and some old clothes for the children. I watch the young men go past, their fast steps, their cameraderie. I watch the way that they speak to each other, animatedly. I observe the way that the world has changed. From Adderley street I take a taxi into Sea Point and walk along the promenade, thinking of June. Absurdly I get a sudden urge to go into La Perla, the restaurant where June and I had once eaten crayfish, feeling guilty every mouthful for our indulgence, but then I picture

myself alone at the table, the waiter cordially offering wine for the table, and desist.

Then there are x-rays, another consultation. Across his mahogany desk the doctor tells me I have cancer of the pancreas. He says that it has been with me some time, beginning as a malignant growth, and has already taken control of most of my pancreas. He says he fears that soon it will spread to my stomach, then perhaps my colon. He says that it is a very serious matter, that it is up to me, but probably I should have chemotherapy. It is futile to operate.

On my final day before returning to Elim I visit the planetarium. Amongst a commotion of schoolchildren I watch a track of yellow light angle towards the names of constellations.

10

As I get out of my car at Elim one of the children comes running towards me. I can do nothing but pretend at a smile. The child wishes to hug me but I do not have the strength to lift my arms. The nurses help me out of my car and take me to my bed.

I lie down with my head on my pillow. I hear one of the nurses behind my door. 'Dis so ongelukkig,' she is saying. 'Hy is nog so jonk.'

Yet I lie there feeling like an old man, at the verge of death. I wish only to sleep. In the evening Jason comes to visit. He says that the mission has been

made distraught by the news. He says that they have prayed for me in my absence.

'Do you struggle with pain?' he asks.

'Not too much,' I answer.

He smiles then and we begin to talk about the children, which of them are doing well and which are not. He says the nurses have been a great help to him, that generally they have managed to look after the mission.

After a time I say to him, 'Do you know, as I was coming out of Cape Town, along the N2, there were soldiers on turrets over the road. They are starting to patrol the road now.'

'It is the stranglehold on this country,' he says. 'It is no longer inconspicuous.'

'And in Elim?'

'In Elim nothing changes,' he laughs.

Again we are silent, both thinking of the girl.

'Has Van Wyk been here?' I ask finally.

'He came once. He says that the semen sample they sent to Cape Town could not help them because there is no description of the man. There were no witnesses. He says there is nothing they can do without witnesses. They can't test everyone.'

'Perhaps it is futile,' I say after a moment. 'Perhaps we will never know.'

'We have to go on at some point,' he says.

'But why does he take her to the bath? Why does he not leave her in the veld?'

He looks away and I become embarrassed for having asked the question. He stares at my bookshelf, reading the titles off the spines. He stands up finally and goes to a shelf. I begin to feel exhausted, wanting to sleep, wanting him to leave. The pain is now shrouded by the pills I have taken before going to bed. It seems that the room around me has become misted up, as in a car at night with the cold winter air outside and the breathing of people in the interior warm and moist.

As I drift off the thought comes back to me – the doctor across his desk, behind him his small window through which I can see just the top of Signal Hill, his slow monotonous voice telling me that I have cancer.

11

One of the young nurses, Petra, a beautiful coloured girl who began work at Elim about a year ago, comes to me today in tears.

'What is the matter?' I ask her from my desk.

Through stifled sobs she says, 'Meneer, ek is swanger.'

I look at her, at this girl who curtsies at the threshhold of the room, who does not have the courage to look me in the eye.

'Who is the father?' I ask her sternly.

Her sobs rise in pitch. 'Meneer, ek kan nie sê nie.'

'Petra, jy is nie getroud nie,' I tell her more softly.

'Ek weet, meneer,' she keeps repeating. 'Ek weet, meneer.'

Struggling, I pull myself up from my desk and stand in front of her. She shies away from me to the threshold of the room. I want to tell her not to be afraid, that I am not angry with her, that we will help her. Yet, in her eyes, I realise that it is not my anger she is afraid of, that perhaps it is my disease. It occurs to me that it is strange, this girl coming to me for comfort, for help. Should she not be frightened of me, scared of losing her work, terrified that the dominee will castigate her, this cold distant man who rarely says a word to her?

I stand wobbling in the centre of the room. 'Wat is verkeerd, Petra?' I press her.

'Meneer ...' she stammers, bursting once again into tears.

'Wie het dit gedoen?' I insist, immobilised by her anguish, unable to go to her, to take her shoulders in my hands.

'Ek kan nie sê nie,' she sobs.

'Ons sal hom vind,' I tell her sternly, the words coming out of my mouth sounding hollow, self-righteous. Did he hurt you? I want to ask her, but cannot articulate the words.

'Ek is jammer, meneer,' she seems to be saying through her sobs, not moving from the threshhold of the room.

'Jy moenie bekommerd wees nie,' I tell her weakly.

What is it that she wants from me, why has she come to me? Is this what it feels like to fail – standing before a young woman who seems to be begging for help, to feel nothing, only the anguish of impotence.

'Hoe kan ek help?' I ask softly.

She runs from the room. From outside my house I hear her anguished sobs, her gasps for air. I imagine her huddled against the wall of my house, huddled into the narrow shadow of the roof, out of the midday sun. The wail that she makes sounds like the cry of a desperate animal.

12

I spend the rest of the day mulling around the house, sending away the nurse who comes to check on me with a sharp word.

Jason comes past in the early evening, to report on the status of some of the borderline children. A new boy from Wellington who had been hit by a car, now wheelchair-bound, his mind gone dull; the worsening condition of the sixteen year-old girl whom we have been caring for for five years, the imminent collapse of her lungs as her diaphragm begins to fail.

'We will have to send her to Cape Town,' Jason tells me.

I simply stare at him from my bed and nod my head forlornly, with little empathy.

'And you?' he asks, almost cheerily. 'How are you feeling?'

'Send her to Cape Town by the end of the week,' I hear myself command him. 'If she must go then she must go.'

He watches me as he packs the folders back into his case. Then, as if reading my mind, adds, 'No news from Van Wyk. He told me that it will probably be difficult from now. Too much time has gone by.'

When he leaves I lie still for perhaps a half an hour. I hold myself like a child who is terrified of moving for fear of disturbing the monsters that inhabit his room. I want to call him back to say to him, please, stay for dinner, let us watch television or drink brandy together. We can talk about anything, even June. But I am too terrified to move.

I dream that it was not a vagrant that murdered the girl, that it was I. My dream becomes hazy at the point of violence, as if my imagination were refusing to allow me access to those scenes, as if it were censoring me. I wake intermittently, then return to the dream, as if it were a book to which I was returning. I can see the flowers and the bath and the girl floating in the muddied water, the water gone red with her blood. When I look at my hands that hold down her head in the water, they are encircled by her long dark hair. The hair begins to wrap itself into the flesh of my arms, drawing ribbons of blood. When I pull my arms from the water I scream.

13

Jason encourages me today to go with him to one of the springbok farms just west of Bredasdorp. There is a child there he wishes to examine.

We drive in the old blue bakkie out of the gates of the school, a few of the children peering at us from the fence. He gears the vehicle roughly as we pull onto the dust-track road north towards the national highway. I have a map out to help direct us. We are to examine a child who six months ago fell from the edge of a concrete weir into a small dam, who is now silent.

As we drive north the sun is to the right of us, rising to midday, beating down hard. Between the sparse plots of maize are barbed-wire fences, then the odd outhouse, a cattle-dip, than a tractor shed. Men stand at the edges of the road, their black faces in the blinding light mute and shadowless.

Jason remains silent. He leans his elbow against the rusted door-sill and the smoke from his cigarette drifts lazily, is then caught by a thrust of air, dances wide, then drifts again. With his left hand he commands the vehicle. Behind us, with each advancing kilometre, we leave the mission of Elim, its sanctuary.

Half an hour later we stop outside a shop at the side of the gravel road with a sign that reads 'Dhansay's Supply Store'. There is a cluster of men and women standing outside. As we go past the dour black faces into the store, I catch the stale smell of alcohol drunk in midday heat.

Inside a woman takes our order. We stand staring at the meat behind the glass of the butcher's cabinet. I think that I ask her for a cup of coffee. I think, between the event of her turning to the boy, who stands with her at the edge of the cabinet, and Jason turning to me to say something, I collapse. I fall to the floor hard, like a bag of meal.

From the aspect of the floor I see a young woman, whose face has begun to go soft from alcohol, peering at me from the entrance of the store. She glances back outside, then seems to sway off the structure of the building before staggering towards me. I feel suddenly terrified by her.

Jason lifts me up by my arms. I touch the back of my head which has knocked against the ground. I feel my fingers in my hair go damp from blood. Jason drives us back to Elim.

This is when I know for certain that I will die, that probably I will not see the summer out: when the woman staggers towards me, when I finally feel the fear in me.

14

For what I imagine to be about a week, I lie in my bed in a state of drugged half-consciousness. I can only measure time from the fluctuations of temperature that my body feels. I overdrug myself, wanting never to come out of my room, never to be fully conscious. Somewhere in that time, in the period of that week, I see

phantom faces above me, a young woman wiping my forehead, wiping my lips through which she has tried to force some water.

When finally I wake I sense that Jason is at the side of my bed. Although I am awake he says nothing, waiting for me to look at him. He tells me that it is a fever that I have had, that it has little to do with my cancer, although my body's defences are down and this may have made it easier for the fever to get a hold of me. He says that I must be careful with the painkillers, that this might have exacerbated the condition.

'You should go back to Cape Town,' he tells me. 'You should be in hospital.'

'I will be fine. I just need to rest.'

'You have cancer. You need special medical care. You need doctors, possibly chemotherapy, as well as rest. There is no point in being stubborn.'

I look at him sharply, but he simply stares back at me.

'My place is in Elim,' I tell him slowly. 'If I am to recover, then I will recover.'

'So it is in the hands of God, then?' he says sarcastically.

Once again I glance at him crossly, this young man just out of University, who has been in Elim not four months. Yet his self-assurance prevents me from saying anything. I am too tired even to assert myself.

'Let me sleep,' I tell him. 'I am tired.'

After this an immeasurable time goes by. Whether it is day or night I am not certain. At some point I imagine that I have woken and that Jason stands above

the bed. I feel his hand touch my forehead and I force open my eyes. He is looking down at me, stroking my forehead. Yet, in the haze of my mind, under the hold of the drugs I have taken, I believe him to be touching me not with sympathy, but rather with curiosity. It is as if, I think to myself, the beginnings of death were fascinating to him. This is the way he is looking down at me, as if he should not pass by the opportunity to touch death, its presence.

Yet I tell myself that it is nonsense, that it is imagined, that the cancer has infected my mind, my perceptions, making me bitter.

My dreams are hazy. I dream that he is still there. I open my eyes, searching the room furtively, not finding him. I dream that he crouches down beside me so that his head is level with mine, so that he can draw his mouth against my ear. He whispers to me that the nurses know me, that they have seen me at night entering the wards, hovering over the bed of a boy. Then he goes, leaving his hot breath against my ear.

15

Knowing that I will die, I begin to sort a lifetime of possessions into boxes. I go through old letters. I give away clothes to the poorest of the locals, old corduroy slacks, wool jerseys, tennis shoes. I watch the way the local men accept these gifts, their heads down-turned, their faces grim, sincere.

For reasons I am unable to explain I refuse chemotherapy. The doctor in Cape Town implores me over the telephone. He begs me to enter a program. He tells me that there is some chance of success. That, although the odds are against me, I must muster up hope. Yet I have no desire to return to Cape Town, to find myself in the road-wide hallways of Groote Schuur hospital, to watch myself become invalid. The excuses I make to him over the telephone are vain and childish, reeking of self-pity. I tell him absurdly that I am too busy to travel, that the mission is in need of my guidance, that I am required.

Rather I choose to lie in the grip of an impending summer heat, surrounded by my books, tended to by the nurses. I am brought back to the history I studied as a student of the Church. Bed-ridden, I read incessantly, intermittently adjusting my body for comfort, squandering my time with words. The summer heat is now wrapped around the house like a cat over its dead prey.

I read the history of the Moravian Church, the history of the Hussites and the Lutherans. I begin to find history more interesting than faith. When one of the maids enters the room I become annoyed at her disturbance. The questions that are asked concerning my health I shrug off impatiently. I want only to cloister myself with these stories, these involved theological arguments of the Renaissance.

It was in a Protestant Church in Cape Town that I married June, converting later to the Moravian order. I had studied and done my internship at Groote Schuur, and then gone to Winston-Salem for two years, returning with the dream

of healing the wounds of South Africa. Others of my medical class were now in Canada or Australia, were practising paediatricians or surgeons. And others had been arrested, had fled to Britain, or had simply raised families, watching rugby on Saturdays.

I took June with me to Elim, a young woman with a degree in psychology. She took some work with her from the city, studying and reading late into the evenings, with the crickets scratching like mad outside our window. But eventually there was nothing for her to do but read and cook and occasionally listen to the radio, tuned to the local Afrikaans channel whose words we did not properly understand. We used to joke sometimes about the music, its oversweet lyrics and tones. She made some attempt at befriending the local women of Bredasdorp and Arniston, but they must have been as foreign to her both in heritage and language as the black women working in the kitchen of the baas.

After a time, after years at the mission, she began to visit Cape Town more often. In Elim she would read and read endlessly, hardly communicating. She watched her husband get fat, his mind go weak. She watched herself dry up in the Agulhas sun, in the pervasive heat. It is within this context that I begin to abhor myself, that I venture out of sanity, that I profane myself.

16

Sometimes, when I think of the boy, I think of him in his coffin before the altar of the Church. I am standing above him, reading familiar words from the Scriptures to a quiet congregation. It is another death at Elim, another child. His face is as pale as alabaster, the effects of his long struggle with tuberculosis. On this occasion my voice quivers, my hands are gripped to the wood of the altar, I am keeping back tears.

Other times I think of him when he first arrives in Elim. He is a fourteen year-old boy from the Oudtshoorn area, who cannot speak or hear, who is mute. I try to remember him arriving with his father, but it is too long ago to recall. I imagine that I see the father standing in the sun before me with his cap in his hand. Perhaps I came out and said to him that we would keep the boy, he nodding his head, looking down at the ground, then walking away down the drive. I think of him travelling alone the long distance back to Oudtshoorn, perhaps in a bakkie that he had borrowed from his baas, or perhaps he had taken the national highway bus, first having to walk to Bredasdorp.

The boy is lithe and beautiful. His skin is perfectly smooth, his face comforting. He has the habit of staring, causing the nurses to avoid his gaze. He has this quality of looking at people as if he understood them. There is no trace of the dementia in his face that afflicts the other children.

We are unable to determine what is wrong with him. We know only that he has always been silent. Certainly, as is confirmed by the report that accompanies his arrival, he suffers from some sort of autism, for he makes no effort to communicate. In the correspondence I have with the government doctors there is a sense of frustration with the boy, as if he chose not to speak, rather than being unable to speak. There is also the suggestion of failure at sending him to Elim, that perhaps his dysfunction is psychological, that, with the correct treatment, with the correct care, he could be weaned out of himself.

By the nurses he is taken with the rest of the children to the dining hall, to the schoolroom, to the wards. He can be made, like many of the children, to perform the exercises which the nurses set, but he demonstrates none of the excitement of the others. Each treats him in her own unique way. One of the younger nurses speaks to him as if he were a one-year-old child, cooing at him, holding his face in her hands. Another simply ignores him, manoeuvering his limbs like those of a mannequin, never looking into his eyes. Another instructs him sternly, as if he were a servant.

In Church he sits in the front pew and stares at me unblinkingly as I read from the Scriptures. However carefully one searches his face, there seems to be no self-awareness, his stare unmoving, completely and utterly absorbed. As I stand before the congregation of the children and their caretakers, as I glance across the length of the pews, I feel his eyes on me like the eyes of God.

Do I believe that he does not hear the words I speak, that he does not understand their meaning? Perhaps he has the ability to read my lips, or perhaps the tests we have done on his hearing he is able to bluff his way through, pretending that the sharp sounds made suddenly behind his head are not there. Yet why would a child pretend not to hear? Does a child have the insight to choose not to enter the world? Is there not in every child a desire to live, a desire to grasp onto words, to taste them, to articulate them?

I cannot accept that he does not hear my words. If I work hard, I tell myself, if I devote myself to his care, perhaps I will begin to heal him. I want to believe that he hears every word, that he collects my words as a plant collects the dew in the desert, by remaining still, by catching the drops as they condensate on his leaves, falling to his centre.

17

Do you remember, June once began, standing before the hot-plates of the gas stove in the kitchen, spooning a tomato soup, or braising a leg of lamb, or simply standing there with her hands planted firmly on the linoleum counter, her body hunched over. *Do you remember?* She repeated once again. There was implicit in her voice something unmentionable, something which she would not name. But in the end the memory itself was irrelevant; it was only the notion of remembrance that she was evoking, the nostalgia of our lives together.

Perhaps I was standing under the lintel of the hallway door, leaning against my arm against the wall, watching her. Had I been in the process of examining her, searching her frame for the completion of her sentence, for the memory itself? Were my eyes intent upon her? Or rather, were her words simply lost to me as I continued through the kitchen to my study, a tiny room filled with books, to stare out the small window, bouganvillea blooming outside? I cannot remember. I can only remember the sadness of her voice, its chilling tone, as she said those words: *Do you remember?*

Whether she knew or she did not know, she was taken from me on the N2 back to Bredasdorp, on the curves of Sir Lowry's Pass, going down towards the turn-off for Hermanus. When I get there, in the rain and the mist of a late evening, the wreckage has not yet been removed – two vehicles, a head-on collision, a young man going in the opposite direction who has left a wedding in Grabouw, who has been drinking. There are two dead, my wife and a young man, a student from Stellenbosch University.

After this I am alone in my house each evening, watching the television, reading odd chapters from books, allowing my small dominee's house to go back to the squalor I lived in as a bachelor. This is the beginning of June's absence: dishes left in the sink until the maid came each Thursday, clothes worn soiled and unwashed, newspaper print staining the couches, the open shell of a broken VCR that the Church sent me from Cape Town left lying on the floor of the living room. I am unable to finish a book, nor even to write my sermons. I

have not the concentration. I begin to shun the company of the locals. No longer am I invited to the farmers' homes for dinner or bridge or for a game of tennis in Arniston.

It takes a great effort of will to continue, to carry on as the director of the mission, to pull myself back from a precipice. And the boy is a comfort.

18

This is the first occasion, the first beam that is removed from the bridge which would lead me back to sanity. The boy is sitting alone on a bench outside the schoolroom. The rest of the children are in class drawing with the new crayons we have received from Cape Town. I am emerging into the blinding sun from my office. He stares at me as I go to him. I sit beside him and I say nothing and of course he says nothing. I turn to look at him – his short cropped hair, his skin tight and smooth over the bone of his jaw. I find myself looking at the skin of his neck, a light brown skin as smooth as satin. His arms are long and smooth and lithe, the muscles beneath are firm.

I touch the skin of his arm with my rough hands, my fingers moving across the canvas of his flesh. He turns to me – his expression calm, resigned.

I begin to hate my body. I stare at myself in the warped mirror that is hidden behind the door of my cupboard. I examine the fat that hangs around my hips, the way that my muscles have gone slack, the way that my skin has gone rough

as leather. I cannot accept that it is I whom I stare at in the mirror. Rather it is another, a middle-aged man whose body has long been neglected, whose expression is one of dull acceptance, who appears neither proud nor ashamed. I think caustically of this image of myself as one of those enigmatic anthropological photographs one finds in the National Geographic – here is the dominee of a small Moravian mission on the Agulhas Peninsula of Southern Africa. That is all. Just an image.

I peer at my own face, examining it as if searching for a clue. In it I see nothing of the disturbing poise that the child exhibits. I see only the grimace of a man fighting against lust, a self-involved paranoia, a bleakness of spirit.

19

Like an eye in the heart of a storm, a day comes when I begin to feel stronger. A mist has come in the early morning hours and has shrouded the Agulhas coast in a veil that hides the sun – it is the first cool day of summer. In the evening I am strong enough to move, to struggle out of my bed against the cramps in my legs, to test whether the pain will begin, holding still, hoping, then slowly getting dressed.

Feeling better, gathering my legs, I make my way towards the schoolrooms. The nurses greet me as they come out of the washroom, one smiling at me a bright smile.

'U lyk heerlik beter,' she says.

It is true, I tell myself. It is a gap in my pain, a respite. Yet, I have now become superstitious about my illness, not allowing myself to feel positive, knowing its machinations. It is better that I say nothing, that I do not invite the pain back into me, that I do not taunt it.

The children have already been taken back to their rooms, so that the yard is quiet. I walk briefly down to the gates of the mission and stand at the road watching the movements of the locals. Several women go past with wicker-basket bundles perched on their wrapped heads. Two men go by holding hands. I kneel into the dirt and watch as a dung beetle scuttles. A moon, rising out of the east, pebble-white, begins to cast shadows.

I should go to the offices, I tell myself. I must make proper use of this time, for it may not come again. I should clear up my papers, sort through them, throw much of the old paperwork away, give Jason some of the case material to catalogue. When I get to the schoolrooms I push open the door hard against a chair that has been propped against it on the other side. It eventually falls backwards and I am able to force my way in. With my hand searching the wall I manage to find the lightswitch in the dark.

The room is dusty; empty, the children, I remember, having been allowed to follow the government school vacations over the past ten days. I make my way between the desks and run a finger over the wood, leaving lines in the dust. On the walls are several of the childrens' paintings and drawings which I peer at.

Here is one drawing of a tree, the bulbous shape of an indiscriminate bird planted on a branch. Here is another depicting a face, the lips painted irregularly in a bright red colour. There is another of the Church, done more accurately, concentrated lines depicting shadows.

One drawing done in koki seems simply to signify the sun, a bright yellow-red sphere in the centre of a page, the paper slightly warped in its middle by the strength of the artist's hand. I imagine the child huddled over the paper, a small hand pressing with concentration onto the koki pen.

While I am rummaging through the paperwork that has been left scattered across my desk, I begin to hear the sound of a girl sobbing. It is a soft sound, too soft to place, that could almost be mocking, pretending. I stop my movements and hold myself still and concentrate to hear the sound more clearly. At first there is nothing, then a moment when the voice seems to begin again to weep. It is a bird, I tell myself, one that the previous director of Elim would have identified within seconds. Later on he would have checked his assertion against the tapes of birdcalls I had found when I had moved with June into the cottage. This is the quality of that sound: that I search in it for whether it is human.

Then there is another voice, a lower voice, a man's, which causes the sobbing to cease. The sound I have heard I am now certain is human: it is dialogue. Yet there is a tone to the man's voice, even though the words are not audible, that suggests a forceful quality, like an incantation that is made to bolster oneself against fear; or like a voice that speaks slowly, clearly, with

menace. When I begin to pack up the papers, scraping the metal filing drawers back into the cabinet, the voices suddenly stop. I too stop moving, a dead silence. Quite irrationally I feel fear, pain beginning to wash through me once again, the respite over. Without thinking I struggle quickly out of the windowless office and reach the entrance to the schoolhouse, switching off the lights. A moment of darkness as my eyes begin to adjust. I want to be back in my cottage, in my room, reading, without again venturing onto the mission.

But then, out of the corner of my eye, as I step away from the building, I see movement, two figures perhaps thirty metres away at the corner of the prefab schoolhouse where the offices are, two dark silhouettes under the half-moon, one tall, standing over the other, who is crouched onto the ground. They seem incongruous, as if they were caught in some obscene act. Yet it is the girl's sobbing that I had heard through the thin walls that make me think: they should not be there, that it is the taller figure who oppresses her, the way he stands over her.

In fear I call out sharply in the darkness, 'Wie is daar?'

Suddenly they see me, the taller figure turning to face the origin of this voice, a thin voice that comes from the entrance of the schoolhouse. In that indelible moment, in that quarter-second before he turns and runs from the girl, who is crouched in fear now against the wall of the building, I recognise him. My heart seems to miss a beat, fear clutching me. His figure turns behind the schoolhouse and sprints down the gravel drive. The thought which absurdly

occupies me is this: that, in that moment, under the light of a half-moon, his eyes perhaps better adjusted to the dark than mine, he too recognised me.

The girl is now hunched over with her back against the thin wall of the building and has begun to weep violently, her voice rising into a heaving sob, her shoulders shaking as I approach her. I realise as I come closer that she is perhaps physically hurt, that she appears like an animal that is beaten, that huddles into itself, holding itself against torture. When I kneel down and touch her shoulder, she convulses once again into sobs. With the pain piercing through my abdomen I attempt to lift her to her feet.

'Petra,' I say to her absurdly. 'Was it it him who did this to you?'

For a reason that I do not understand, I am unable to speak his name. I can feel her shake within my arms, burying her face into my shoulder.

'Is it him?' I ask her again, pressing her closer to me. I realise that she is not hurt, that this may have been some kind of altercation, that she had fallen to the ground in despair, probably begging him to help her now that he had made her pregnant. There is another question that I want to ask her, one that I am unable to articulate: whether he had pressed himself upon her, whether he has been violent to her.

Suddenly she wrenches herself away from me, her face screwed up in tears, made ugly by her anguish. She runs from me down the drive towards the gates of the mission, her sobs catching in her throat.

20

When Jason first touches her, this young nurse who is perhaps nineteen years old, does he touch her tenderly? Does he brush his hand across her arm as they carry together one of the children to the washroom? Or does he simply press himself against her, cornering her somewhere in the wards late one night, she pushing her arms into him, attempting to get him away from her? Does he take her to his rooms or does he thrust himself into her on the floor of the wards, the children on the beds above listening to her cries? Is there any affection in his touch? What sound does she emit from her lips when he penetrates her? I try to imagine the sinews in his back pulling tight, his hips moving hard, rhythmically, her thighs opened wide under him, his mouth breathing hot air against her ear. Is she clothed when he penetrates her, or has he ripped off her dress? Her face, in my imagination, is stifling pain, her eyes are closed.

I find myself wanting to know where it has occurred, this encounter. Whether it has occurred only once, that perhaps she was unlucky, that she was cursed forever during a single moment, made pregnant by a man who raped her. Or whether it occurs many times; that she is too terrified to speak to anyone for weeks, perhaps months. At points I am able to convince myself that I have simply misjudged this encounter: that perhaps Jason has little to do with her pregnancy, this night that I see him standing above her he is helping her, he is trying to convince her to be strong. Or: that it was he who has made her

pregnant, but not violently, that they are lovers. It is my jealousy that makes me perceive him as violent, for I too wish to have this beautiful girl in my arms, her fingers on my back.

Yet there is a thought too that the girl is not pregnant at all: there is a degree of fear when she comes to my cottage that weighs on me, she knows no other way to tell me that she has been abused, she simply wants to convey her fear. This is what disturbs me – that she struggles with her words even after she has told me, that she will not leave the room, that she came to me at all. Who am I? A dominee who vaguely recalls her name, who has perhaps in her time at Elim spoken one hundred words to her. Why does she not go to the women of the village like the other girls to whom this age-old plight occurs. She is terrified to tell her story – she must go to the highest authority. It occurs to me suddenly, in a flash of insight that saddens me, that she came to me not to seek my help, but to seek the help of that which I represent, God.

Absurdly, I discover that I become aroused imagining him over her, thrusting into her, her head clutched in his hands, her hair through his fingers. I wrench my mind away from this image, lying still in the heat of my room like a rotting cadaver, aroused at death.

21

When, several days later, Jason comes through, he pretends that I do not know. He comes into my room after the dinner hour, bringing me a book and a plate of

food. I watch the way he looks at me, trying to determine whether he is testing me. But it seems almost that he is looking at me paternalistically, the balance of power between us having been undone over the weeks of my illness.

He has usurped me, I begin to realise. He has encouraged my dependance, cloistering me in my own cottage as if I were a visiting relative who might embarrass the family.

'I thought you might want to read this,' he says, showing me the book. 'An old copy of Graves that I found in our library. Probably hasn't been read for twenty years.'

I take the book and page through it, the lines misting up before me like lines of braille. Does he stroke her hair after he has done with her? Does she cry afterwards, clutching him to her?

'Do you want me to put on a record?' he says. 'Something classical, Brahms?'

'Yes,' I utter. 'Brahms.'

The music fills the house, coming through from the living room. He watches me take my pills after I have eaten.

'Does it bother you?' I finally ask him.

'What?'

'Does it bother you that we will never know who murdered the child?'

'We might one day know,' he says. 'Perhaps Van Wyk will devote himself to the investigation, never giving up. I don't know.'

'What will you do after you leave Elim?' I ask him.

'Go back to Cape Town. Perhaps work for a while. I may go overseas.'

'There is no future for you here?'

'I want to travel. I think I want to go to South America and Central America. I want to see the Aztec ruins, perhaps climb the volcanoes.'

'What about the girl?'

'We have buried her,' he says.

'No. What about Petra?'

There is a moment in which he betrays his surprise, his eyes almost perceptibly going wide, his lips tightening. But it is brief.

'She is too young to have a child,' he says slowly. 'If you think about it she will probably suffer less if she terminated. I have told her this but she will not listen.'

'She has told me that it is you who has made her pregnant.'

He seems almost to smile. 'No. She has not told you that,' he says. He draws his hand to his face and brushes the back of his hand across the stubble of his face.

'She is terrified,' I hear myself say. 'You have hurt her.'

He rises from the chair, scraping it sharply across the wooden floor. For a second I am afraid of him – a mad fear that he will take me by the throat. But he simply leans against the door frame, staring hard at me.

'You should go to the hospital in Cape Town,' he tells me. 'They will care for you there.'

'I want you to send her to me,' I force myself to say. 'I want to speak with her.'

When he has gone I find my limbs are shaking, that I am struggling for breath. For a while I can think of nothing, only that he had stood for a moment above my bed, that I had imagined a malevolence in him. Had Petra too, in those first moments of her encounter with him, feared him in this way? Had her heart, as he had stood over her, as she had registered that his dead eyes were intent upon her, begun to race? I tell myself that I should call Van Wyk, that the girl should lay a charge.

I listen carefully for his footsteps as they retreat from my cottage across the drive, the Brahms reaching its crescendos.

22

I look for and find his file in the main offices of the hospice. I sweep clear the surface of the desk while the nurses are busy in the wards, after I have watched from the window of my cottage Jason take the bakkie out the gates of the mission. Yet still I feel a pang of fear as I begin reading, a fear of being caught, as if I were a common thief rustling through another's belongings.

There are his school records, a place I have never heard of somewhere near Johannesburg, his application for his medical degree, pages covering the records of his studies, as well as his application to do his internship at Elim. From the details I can glean from his records he appears as a solid student, his degree completed admirably. Several holiday periods were spent in the Natal region in a small hospital near the Drakensburg; there is a glowing report from his supervisor.

In his medical records that are attached to his military exemption, I find details of a congenital heart condition. Something to do with a fetal cavity in his heart that was operated on – it is termed in the report a cyanotic condition – and then there was a further corrective operation in his teens when a degree of rheumatism was diagnosed. I scan my memory of my own now-distant medical training, its vocabulary less scientific; blue baby, hole-in-the-heart. I find myself wondering whether his heart condition was a blessing to him, allowing him to avoid the two-year stint with the South African Defence Force. Or rather, is it a condition that focuses his mind at an early age, differentiating him from his peers, perhaps making him slightly austere, ascetic in his habits, turning him towards medicine?

I think of him as a thirteen year-old boy going into theatre, being operated upon, his chest being opened up like a can, his heart in the hands of a doctor, then his chest once again being sealed shut, the flaps of skin like wings at each side stitched together with surgical wire, leaving a scar that will run from his

solar plexus to his neck. I search my memory for prior evidence of this scar, for the times I have seen him in the open. Is there a moment I can recall when he removed his shirt, revealing the dead line seperating the two sides of his chest? Perhaps I might have seen this scar on the day we had collected the proteas, when he and some of the nurses had gone to swim in the reservoir on the Du Toit farm, before we discovered the girl later that afternoon.

Where had I been while they had been swimming, too flabby to accept the invitation, embarrassed at my body? It would not do to have the dominee seen half-naked, frolicking about in the water with the young nurses. I try to imagine the perfect symmetry of that scar, dividing him in halves. Again, I am appalled at becoming aroused, wondering at his body moving into Petra's, her gasps for breath, her fingers tracing that line across his body.

Walking slowly back across the yard, back towards my cottage, I carry his file close to my chest. This suspicion of mine, that a young doctor who has come out to the ends of the earth to help with damaged, malformed children, would abuse or rape a young woman, appals me. If I have misjudged him, if the cancer that eats at me has affected my perceptions to this degree, then I will perish mad, haunted by my own demons. Yet there is her palpable fear, her coming to me, and there is his quiet self-reliance, his unshakeable arrogance. Why had he not even shuddered when I had accused him? Why had he not become impassioned, insisting his innocence?

Then suddenly, as if the earth has shuddered, I fall hard to the ground. An awful stabbing pain pierces me through my stomach. I twist my head around as I lie on the gravel yard, searching for the origin of the pain, realising, with a cold wash up my spine, that it is from within me that it emerges.

I manage to pick myself up and stagger towards the outside porch of my house. Why do I not shout out for help? Why do I not call the nurses to carry me to my bed, getting them to call an ambulance from Bredasdorp? Then I realise, through the waves of pain that wash through me, that I am afraid that he will come.

When I reach the outside porch of my house, I feel my bowels go soft. I want to cry with the indignity of my disease. I am able to get through my front door into the passage, managing to reach my bathroom where there is now a torrent of pain. I am sobbing on the tiled floor, begging God to let me die. I pass out, come back to consciousness, pass out once again. My mind is a muddle of images that randomly come before me; the girl in the bath of proteas, Petra crouched on the gravel drive, Jason's body naked over her, her legs wide apart. At points the image of June in our kitchen insinuates itself into my nightmare, her hands busy over a pot on the stove.

23

When I wake I am in a white room, a room that I slowly recognise to be one of our private rooms in the hospice. There is a chair in the corner, a small window that is dark, the sky black, moonless. There is a drip in my arm. Jason is in the room, also one of the nurses, a senior matron.

All the while they speak to me I watch their mouths move out of synch with their words. I am told that the cancer has more than likely spread to my stomach, that there is an ambulance on its way to me from Bredasdorp. I will be taken to Groote Schuur hospital. My doctor is expecting me there. I will receive constant care. If there is anything that I need they will bring it to me. I need only ask.

When the nurse leaves the room to pack some clothes for me, Jason comes nearer. I want to shout out to her, to call her back, but it would appear insane, a mad gesture made by a dying man against his fate. They would say that I became bitter towards the end. Like a mango that is left to rot in the rain. This is common, they will say, this characteristic of indignity, of hate, of vile and rash imaginings close to death.

'There were papers,' he says finally, 'that we found beside you.'

'Which papers?'

'Papers from the files, from the personnel files. We found them on the porch of your house, scattered about. You must have dropped them just before you collapsed. I have returned them to the offices.'

I wait for him to say more. I stare at the ceiling, avoiding his eyes. I tell myself: you are ill, you are no longer able to discern reality from fantasy. Do not fear him.

'These files,' he says, 'these are my records. They belong to me.'

There is a long moment that is immeasurable, so that it seems as if his words – *they belong to me* – are spoken repeatedly, that they do not leave the room.

'Where is Petra?' I ask him finally.

'She has left Elim,' he says coldly.

Perhaps I sleep then, slipping into half-consciousness, sliding out of the room into dreams. At points I imagine that he is standing over me, peering at me, and I struggle out of sleep, grasping at consciousness, terrified, but there is no-one there.

At one stage I lift my head to see a young nurse in the room and for a moment I think it is Petra. But I am mistaken. I ask the nurse where Dr Heaney is and she tells me that he is outside with the ambulance, helping to arrange things.

I find that I am thinking of her, of Petra, and I force myself to go over the moments before she fled from my room, something from that scene disturbing me, irritating me. She is at the threshhold to the room, her arm raised to his eyes, holding with her hand the edge of the door, supporting herself. Through her sobs she says something, something which I have blocked from my mind.

She says, more as an utterance to herself than to me, 'Dis die meisiekind wat vermoor is. Dis die rede vir al die hartseer.'

24

There is a drip that is attached to my arm that itches at night. Bed-sores begin to build themselves into my flesh. Boredom, even under the bureaucracy of the morphine, begins to haunt me. My doctor in Cape Town, in the cancer ward at Groote Schuur hospital, tells me that I will have a few weeks to live. He tells me that they have performed all the tests over the past few days, that it is necessary for him to inform me of the severity of my condition. His diagnosis must be pessimistic – previous cases that have reached this point have indicated that recovery is rare. He looks hard at me afterwards, my fat doctor, fatter than I have ever been, with his thick beard, trying not to avert his eyes.

Dreams in this state do not exist. Rather, they emerge as vague notions, images that float like reflections across dark water. When I think of the boy I see him being wrapped like a mummy in his stained bedsheets, being hauled from the bed by two of the nurses, being carried onto the stretcher that was waiting in the hall.

There is one day that forces itself onto me from the prison of my memory. It is memory of regret, an irredeemable memory. This is a night during which I have gone out into the still air of Elim, the air of a world that has stopped, as if

time had stopped, and I peer at the half moon and the starless sky and I give myself one more chance. I offer myself a last moment of reprieve, watching the sky as my skin goes cold from the sweat I have produced in my struggles with sleep. And yet, in the end, for all my struggles, I deny myself that reprieve.

I go into the wards and I step between the beds, raised high off the floor with bars protecting each side, and I step uncomfortably, not with the certainty I have during the days. Night makes me an intruder, this place that I occupy so confidently during the day. Now I am stalking through this room as if its geography were new to me. I step gingerly, as if I were traversing the edge of an abyss. This is how I think of myself, at the edge of an abyss. The room seems lighted by an unreal light, shuttered by the blinds into lines of perfect detail. I go to his bed where his face is turned away from me, half of his face exposed by a band of moonlight, half in darkness. I stand above his bed and I am transfixed by the hue of his skin under that light, a kind of grey colour that reminds me of the ashen colour of death, the way the pigment of a body's skin retreats back into the body.

I touch his neck. He moves slightly, twisting his head further into the unreal light. Still his eyes are closed. I stare at the hollow in his neck, at the point at which his collar bones meet, and I begin to pull the sheet from over his body. I touch his chest and stomach through the fabric of his shirt and all the time I am fixed in time and space and I am outside of myself, watching myself from above

the bed, watching my hand move across his body. When I touch him he opens his eyes and he stares into mine and does not move.

My heart stops.

Yet I continue touching him. I lean across him and touch his neck and touch his mouth with my mouth and he turns his head away from me. I hold my hand over him and move my hand and all the time he remains motionless. I lose myself in time until finally he twists his body away from me.

Despair seeps through me like the poison of an adder.

I rush out into the moonlight and hold myself against a wall, struggling for breath. I collapse in the dirt some yards away at the edge of the driveway and I shake with anguish.

This is the cancer that eats at my body, his retribution.

25

There has been a further tragedy. I am summoned from my bed by my doctor to say that there is an urgent telephone call for me, that he must take me in my wheelchair to his office, that I should brace myself for bad news.

It is the chief matron from Elim on the telephone. She had not wanted to tell me, she says. She had wanted to spare me, I have suffered enough. She has worried that the news would upset me, worsening my condition. But in the end it would be wrong for her to keep it from me, I have a right to know.

'It is Petra,' she says. 'We have found her.'

'I did not know she was gone,' I tell her weakly, feeling my skin go cold.

'She was hit by a car,' the woman sobs. 'Near Bredasdorp. She was found this morning.'

There is a silence that is broken by the matron's intermittent sobbing.

'Meneer,' she is saying. 'Ek is jammer. Ons is almal jammer.'

'Why was she in Bredasdorp?' I ask coldly.

'Ek weet nie, meneer. Ek weet nie.'

'Where is Dr Heaney?'

'He is with the police. They are taking her back to her mother's home in Riversdal. Sy was so jonk. Sy was so pragtig en jonk.'

When the doctor is wheeling me back to my bed he asks whether I wish to have a sedative, whether I am alright. When I do not respond, he tries once again, telling me that I need to rest, that I must try not to take the news too hard. He leaves me at my bed, briefly touching my shoulder.

'I am sorry for your loss,' he says.

Yet I lie in my bed and I do not feel loss. I watch my mind racing with a torrent of thoughts, as if I were overcome suddenly with epiphany, as if the concept of crucifixion were new to me, as if for the first time I understood. It is the seed of a notion that is too awful to articulate, too awful even to imagine, that keeps me from grief. I will keep it to myself, this notion. Were I suddenly to blurt out my suspicions the nurses at Groote Schuur would look at me sadly,

thinking me mad. Perhaps they would call my doctor and he too would wonder how it was that this man's mind had so quickly gone. A man near death, he would tell me, a man fighting against cancer, can become illogical, can have fantastical thoughts, can be overcome with delusions. It is as if, in these cases, it were necessary to purge the heart before the failure of the body.

If Jason is in the fields with the children then he is the only one who can know, for they cannot speak. He is able to be alone with the girl. But it is an impossible thought. How is he able to carry her back to the mission, to lay her in the bath, already filled with proteas, and then to drown her? Perhaps it is easy for him; the nurses are out in the fields, the children are mute and the tiled room, the room where the proteas were collected, had been empty. Yet at this point we had already returned to Elim, we were to tie the proteas into bundles and wreaths, the mission was once again busy with activity.

But it is surely a more likely scenario than the one which the Captain from Bredasdorp constructs, the vague notion of a vagrant who wanders onto the mission and finds the girl. This we were not able to tell Van Wyk for certain: whether the girl was one who would go out into the fields, or whether she had stayed behind at the mission. But we had not confessed this, this gap in our knowledge of the crime; it would implicate our negligence.

Perhaps it is only because I too am corrupt that I am able to know. I think: had the boy not died, I too might have frustrated a response out of him. This I am able to admit to myself with an objectivity that is strangely comforting. I

believe this of my condition, that there are moments close to death that I will enjoy the clarity of a divine perception. There are moments too when I think that I am wrong; that it is not the young doctor who murders the girl – that it is I.

Yet I am certain. I imagine him over her, her blue eyes staring into his eyes, her hand being held by his hand.

I have realised too why he takes her to the bath, why she is made to face the ceiling, the petals of the proteas surrounding her face, pasted to her child's body. It is because she is beautiful like this, she is framed.

PART THREE

When Adam Hendricks turns sixteen his father tells him to find work. His older brothers have already left the smallholding outside Riviersonderend, the eldest having gone to Cape Town to work on the railways, the second to Bloemfontein to work on road contruction. The third son is dead of tuberculosis at the age of fourteen.

Adam's father is to receive on his retirement a small sum in pounds from the lucerne farmer he has worked for for thirty years. His wife has died ten years before so that his only daughter will have to care for him. His sons send him money at the end of each month.

There is work to be found on the wine farms in Stellenbosch. Adam hitches on the national highway west towards Cape Town and outside Stellenbosch he gets off the back of a truck. He walks the remaining distance, ten kilometres, from two in the morning to four in the morning and he knows that he will always remember this. Whether it is his imagination he is not certain, but he thinks that he can smell the sweetness of the grapes as he walks.

In Stellenbosch he sits on the stoep of a farm stall and watches the sun come over the mountains of Sir Lowry's Pass. When the stall opens he lines up with a group of other coloured people and makes his order when he reaches the counter. He asks the woman for bread and milk and some sugar and bananas. He watches her call a young boy who goes to fetch the items. When he pays her he counts in his head the money that he has left. Sitting once more on the stoep, he

eats the bananas. The bread and milk he leaves untouched in the brown paper packet which he holds firmly with his hand.

Only when the labourers from the farms come to buy their alcohol from the offsales at the back of the stall, does he remember it is a Saturday.

He becomes afraid of them once they get drunk. One young woman whose face has already become soft from the brandewyn asks him for money. He tells her that he cannot give her any money, and she begins to press him.

He moves away from her and decides to go to the farms, but realises that he does not know which way to go. At the end of the main road through Stellenbosch he turns right and walks for an hour until he is on a sand road. At a gate he reads the name of the owner of the farm on a black metal placard that hangs from a wooden frame. T Van Niekerk.

He is afraid to go onto the farm. He stands at the edge of the road for an hour, finally sitting down in the grass with his back against the pillar of the gate. Two bakkies go by. It is midday when he has got up the courage to go through the gate, up the long straight driveway. Behind the main house he can see that there are vines and a small patch of garlic stems planted in rows. He avoids the front door, walking around the house until he finds a kitchen door. There is a radio that is turned on high behind the door. Two white children suddenly rush towards him from behind the house.

'Wat soek jy, kaffir?' one of the children shouts at him.

'Ekskuus,' he stammers. 'Ek soek werk.'

'Daar's geen werk hier,' the child says sternly.

'Ekskuus.'

'Voetsek,' the child shouts, swinging an arm at him.

At the gate once again he has to decide which way to go. If he returns to Stellenbosch he knows he will be in danger on a Saturday night. Coloured people should not go into the towns during the nights. If he carries on along the sand road there may not be another farm. Yet the sun is now no longer as high as it has been. Soon he will have nowhere to sleep.

He walks away from Stellenbosch. For a long distance the road is flat, then slowly rises into the hills, where he begins to feel cooler. With the sun now low in the sky, he starts to worry that he has gone too far. Turning to face the sun, he tries to see from the height he has gained where the farms are in relation to the town. The forest of pine trees that border the road obscure much of his view.

He decides that he should stop, that he should find a place to sleep. Few cars have gone by, and, if he were to get far enough off the road, no-one will see him.

In a small clearing of the forest, perhaps a hundred metres from the road, he finds a shallow area that he is able to cover with pine needles. He gathers needles for over an hour, beginning to feel faint. When he eats the bread it is dry in his mouth. The milk it is rich and makes him feel sick. Lying on the needles, he props his knapsack under his head. In the night he thinks he hears an owl. Either it is an owl or it is something else. In the far distance he hears a dog bark.

He wakes stiff in the morning, his skin clammy and cold. He is more worried now, soon he will have to find work. But today is Sunday and it would be foolish to go onto a farm on a Sunday. He could be shot for coming onto a farm on a Sunday. Besides this he is afraid to go back down now, now that he has come up into the hills.

In the afternoon he stands once again at the side of the road. Several cars come up the road carrying families of white people. They are dressed in their Sunday clothes. He knows then that there must be farms further on into the hills. A bakkie comes past and stops some way off on the verge of the road. He becomes afraid, wanting to get off the road. But it would be suspicious if he went off the road into the forest. Perhaps he should not be sleeping in the forest.

The bakkie begins to reverse down the verge and then he knows it has stopped for him. It is a white man. The man looks at him from his seat.

'Waarheen gaan jy?' the man says.

'Ek doen niks verkeerd,' Adam says.

'Soek jy werk?'

'Ja baas,' he says.

'Waar sal jy werk kry?'

'Ek soek werk, baas.'

'Klim op die bakkie,' the man commands.

He stands still at the edge of the road, until he is commanded once again.

'Klim op,' the baas says impatiently.

It is cooler now, sitting in the back of the open bakkie, the air rushing by. It takes him to the top of the hills and then they are going along the edge of a river. Outside a gate the bakkie stops and the baas shouts at him to open the gate. When Adam gets off the back and scrapes the metal gate across the gravel he knows then that he will work for the baas.

The farm is large. There are vines and there are horses and there are vegetables, pumpkins and tomatoes and garlic and a herb garden that the baas's wife keeps. There are many labourers, now that it is picking season. He is given a bed in a dormitory with six others with whom he shares a washbasin. The men come from various places; Ceres, Paternoster, Worcester, even from as far as Barrydale. They are slightly older than he is. Their hands are rough from the picking and their skin has the look of leather. They are kind, but on Fridays and Saturdays they drink. The baas pays the men on a Friday afternoon and each is given a half-full bottle of brandy. Sometimes the men fight and one will be hurt by a knife. When Adam sees them on the road on a Sunday morning they do not recognise him.

Three months after Adam arrives on the farm, one of the men is killed by a car. He had walked into the middle of the road and had not avoided the car.

Each of the labourers, all the grape-pickers as well as the garden boys who help the madam as well as the maids and the children's nannies go to the

funeral. The dominee speaks to the congregation very sternly. He says that the wine and the brandy are evil and that Satan uses these temptations as his tools of evil.

In the first season when the grape-picking is over Adam is able to stay on at the farm. The baas Verster says that he will need men to help with the crushing of the grapes. The men must take off their clothes, dressed only in their underwear, and stamp their feet in a bath of grapes until their legs and torsos are blood-red. Later on they wash by swimming in the river.

In the early evenings, the women too will come to swim in the river. If the men are there they wait on the bank, then swim afterwards. The men tease them from the river, splashing water at them. There is a young woman called Anna with whom Adam falls in love. She swims sometimes alone when it is late at night and he discovers this when walking near the river watching the stars. When he sees her she takes fright, wrapping her clothing around herself, running from him. In church he watches her but she does not turn to look at him. He watches to see whether she will drink on a Friday and he sees that she does not.

Once more he finds her swimming in the curve of the river at night. She is swimming in the deep at the opposite side. The river is black under the sky. When she sees him she does not move from the water. He stares at her from his side and she stares back at him.

In the new season of grape-picking he marries her. She is seventeen and he has now turned eighteen. The dominee marries them in a white stone church outside Stellenbosch. Adam asks the madam to write a letter to his father but his father never comes. The men become drunk in the dormitory that night and the baas comes to them with a gun. He says that coloureds cannot drink and he threatens that he will shoot if they are not quiet.

For three months Adam stays in the dormitory and Anna in the maids' cottage, before he is able to find a small house to rent. The house is off the farm, a two kilometre walk that means waking before sunrise to get to the vines. Yet it is better to be out of the dormitory. It is better to be able to return in the evenings to his home, to be only with Anna. The men begin to regard him differently, now that he has left the dormitory. No longer are they required to be civil to him. His introverted nature is now thought of as austerity, rather than shyness. When the baas Verster promotes him to help manage the winery, there is trouble with Anna.

For Anna the two kilometre distance is a chasm that seperates her from the community of workers. She becomes bored in the evenings and afraid of the dark and is irritable with Adam's habits. She complains during the day to the women who work on the farm that she is not able to stay and eat with them in the mess. She begins to despise him, belittling him in the same way that the men do when she comes to find him. One day, after he has begun to work for the

baas in the winery, she calls him a *swartboer*. She is drunk when she calls him this. She has been drinking from the late afternoon, through the early evening and is still drunk when he finds her along the sand road walking home in the pitch black. When he tries to take her by the shoulders she pushes him away. When her belly begins to grow, a year and a half into their marriage, he too begins to drink.

He takes to drinking in the same private way in which he manages the rest of his life. His drinking does not help enamour him to the rest of the men. They watch him on Fridays and Saturdays as he lines up with them at the offsales counter to spend his money on five litre wine jars and half-jacks of cheap brandy. They avoid speaking to him, no longer even goading him. He sees that he is treated like a leper, even by his own wife who will sit with the men and become silent when he comes to fetch her.

He will hold his gaze on the dust of the street and stand at the edge of the circle of men and will say to her, 'Kom, vrou.'

When her child is born he stands on the stoep of his cottage and stares into the open black space of a cloudless night. He waits for his wife's screams to stop, then goes through into her room where the women from the farm are gathered. He asks whether it is a boy or a girl.

The women look at him but turn away and do not answer. When he goes to the child he sees that it is a girl. The afterbirth covers parts of the child so that it

appears like a hairless animal that has been hit by a car. But even then he can see that the child is pale.

Once they remove the afterbirth there is left only streaks of blood stains across parts of the child's torso. The cord from the mother is cut, the child lying almost motionless on the stained blanket. Its head is turned to the side and its tongue protrudes slightly from its mouth. He touches the child's head with his rough hands and moves its head to face him. He sees that the child's eyes are blue.

It takes two or three years for them to know for certain that there is something wrong with the child. When a year has gone by the child still does not walk, is still crawling in a slow purposeless way over the concrete floor of the house. At night Adam will light a fire and will sit drinking in the smoky room. He tells Anna to ask the baas's wife at what age the child should begin to walk, or to speak. There are many days when Adam is drunk and does not go to work, simply lying on his bed, watching the child, sometimes holding her. She stares back at him, a thin streak of phlegm coming down from her lips.

He begins to realise that she will never speak. He takes her head in his hands, and, placing his fingers within her mouth, he pries open her mouth. He speaks loudly into her ears, watching for a reaction. He thinks to himself that she is like a doll, something that he can manipulate. He begs her to make a sound, to

recognise him. He speaks to her softly and at times becomes angry with her, holding her tight in his hands, threatening to hit her against the brick walls.

Other days Anna brings her into the kitchen of the baas's wife, the child sitting in a corner in the pink frock that is bought for her at the local Sentra store. When Anna manages to gather the courage to ask the madam about the girl, the madam tells her that the child should have begun to make words after two years, that at the very least she should begin to recognise her mother.

'Miskien moet jy 'n doktor sien,' she tells Anna. 'Daar is iets verkeerd met die kind.'

Anna stares at the madam, waiting for her to say something more, waiting for the madam to smile at her softly, to touch her arm and tell her that the child will be healthy. But the white woman says nothing. Later she tells Anna to have the lettuce washed by the evening, that the carrots need to be cut.

When Anna walks home that evening she weeps. She wants her heart to turn to stone. She is tired too by the child she carries, her arms becoming heavy. Even the coloured women who work with her in the kitchen will not touch the girl or make childish sounds to her in the way that they do with the other children.

One day Anna overhears one of the maids call her girl-child *die duiwel se kind*. She begins to despair that she is trapped by the child, by the moment of illicit pleasure of which the child is proof. She begins to drink heavily,

neglecting even to feed the child. Adam has to take the girl onto his lap and force the food into her mouth.

One Friday night during a winter rainstorm Anna falls down the side of a donga on her way back to the farm. She is discovered the next day with a broken ankle. She is delirious. The baas decides to fire her but takes her to the hospital in Stellenbosch where she is given a sedative. She lies in the hospital for two weeks with her leg in a cast. When Adam visits she begins once more to sob uncontrollably. She begins too to cough. There are hours that go by without the tight burning pain in her chest and then suddenly she will heave for breath and cough violently. Blood emerges in the phlegm that comes from her mouth, a ring of blood like lipstick pasted to her lips. The white doctor tells her that she has tuberculosis. She becomes very thin, struggling to eat. Adam rarely visits her, never bringing the child.

She cries out for her daughter, telling Adam that she hates him. The doctors tell her that she must rest. They tell Adam that it is not only the tuberculosis which will kill her, that she suffers too from a depression. He understands this to mean that she is sad, that she has been made sad by the poverty of her heart, by her promiscuity. He tells himself that she must die for she is no longer able to love him.

He visits her on the day before she dies, holding her hand in his own, she staring at the ceiling, her face thin and gaunt.

When Adam sees her, in the open coffin in the church, he weeps like a child. He tells himself that God has punished him for his drinking, that Anna has been taken away from him because he has forgotten God. He thinks to himself: perhaps the girl is not the child of one of the sons of the baas, or one of the white men who come onto the farm to watch rugby on a Saturday. Perhaps the girl is the daughter of Satan. When he hurts her, when he throws her from him onto the concrete floor, she only whimpers like a caged animal, terrified, staring back at him. Perhaps he should drown her in the river that runs through the farm, one dark moonless night, her body will float across the valley like a broken doll. He wants to crush her in his hands in order that she will make a sound. He hurts her only that she will make a sound. It begins as a whisper, as if she is drawing in air between her teeth, then rises into a high-pitched monotonous cry.

The dominee tells him, speaking directly to him in a cold dead tone at the funeral, 'Jy moet vir God vra om jou te vergewe.'

The baas keeps Adam on the payroll for only two further months before he fires him.

He tells Adam, standing outside the farmhouse as he hands him a tightly wrapped plastic packet of ten-rand notes, 'Ek voel hartseer vir jou.'

He tells him that he should go back to his father in Swellendam, that the girl should be cared for.

'Daar is iets met haar verkeerd,' he tells Adam.

He looks away from Adam when he tells him this. He waves his arm impatiently when Adam makes no comment.

'Jy moenie hier terug kom nie,' he says finally.

When Adam returns to his house he shuts the door and locks it. He drinks steadily, drinking brandewyn from the bottle, even drinking a bottle of whiskey that he has stolen from the cabinet on the baas's farm. The child sits in her dirty soiled clothes and stares at him. Intermittently she makes the beginnings of her sound. He hurts her. She lies on the concrete floor and stares back at him. He drinks for a week, never eating and never feeding her. When he opens the door to the house he is blinded by the midday sun. He feels his soul leave his body. He looks into the dark of the cottage, at the shape of the girl on the floor and he knows then that he must return to his father. Perhaps, he thinks to himself, my father has died. Yet, nevertheless, he must return to Swellendam. In Swellendam he will live with his sister. He has come into the world, where the devil reigns, and now he must return from it.

In Stellenbosch he returns to the hospital where Anna has died. They examine the child. They take him by the arm and they lead him into a sitting room where there are various magazines. There is a Time magazine and several Style magazines and various children's books. He reads a Dr Seuss book. It is about

going out into the world. There is a picture in it of a boy who is confused by the distorted shapes around him. The shapes are coloured by purple, green and orange bars. The figure that is oppressed by the shapes stands cowering at the edge of the page. He shuts the book carefully when the nurse comes to fetch him.

They ask him several questions. There is a problem with language since the white doctor is an old American man who cannot understand Afrikaans. A young nurse sits with them to translate. When the doctor's words are translated into the question: *hoe oud is sy?* Adam finds that he cannot answer. He finds that his voice is gone and he wonders where she is now, whether she is dead. They interview him for an hour. He watches the white doctor frown at him and so he begins to avert his eyes. After he has signed the papers they wish him to sign, after they lead him out into the hall, when the doctor takes him by the arm to speak to him, still he averts his eyes.

He sleeps in the park that night, under a bench on its concrete base. He wakes stiff, throwing up in the bushes that border the road. A white policeman picks him up and puts him in the back of a van. He is taken to the police station and is taken into a cell. Again he sleeps, dreaming of the girl who stares into his eyes. He is woken when the policeman pulls him up to his feet and again he is made to sign a piece of paper. He tells the policeman that he will go to Swellendam, back to his father. Yet he is certain that his father is dead.

When he returns to the hospital he is told that the girl is gone. When he asks to speak to the American doctor he is told that the doctor is not available. He is asked what he wants. He says to them that he wants to see his daughter.

'Wat is jou naam?' the nurse asks him from across the counter.

'Adam Hendricks,' he tells the nurse.

'Sy is nie hier nie,' the nurse tells him.

'Waar is sy?

'Sy is nie hier nie.'

He finds himself running down the corridor of the hospital towards the room in which he had been interviewed, realising that he does not know the room she had been taken to. He finds himself weeping in a corner of the corridor, holding his face in his hands, then feels the arms of two nurses picking him up from the floor, dragging him towards a single bed in a room. The cold steel of a syringe pierces his arm, his vision going muddy as he lies staring at the plastered ceiling, children's toys littering the room. His mind is washed over by a viscous mist that distorts his anguish. Waking in the evening, he feels emptied of emotion. He makes his way like a phantom down the corridor towards the entrance of the building. Letting himself out into the cool still night air, he begins to walk towards the national highway.

She is taken in a car on a two hour journey into the face of the morning sun, and it is this that she stares at. From beside her the arm of a man stretches across to

test her seatbelt, then moves back to the steering wheel. She sees that the sun, when she moves her head, stays fixed in her vision. The air that comes out of the dashboard of the car chills her skin and she shudders.

'Is it too cold?' the man asks.

She does not answer. Again he stretches across her and then the cold is gone. She wonders at that, at the way that her skin no longer feels the brush of the air, yet her skin remains cold to touch. Sometimes the man speaks to her but she never answers.

Her bed is located in the corner of a large room, one of several beds that are high off the floor of the room. The floor is tiled in square white tiles. Each of the beds is occupied by a child, some of whom make noises at her; and then there are others, older, who move between the beds like phantoms, who wash the children, sometimes holding them in their arms. At night she is in a room of sounds, breathing, coughing sounds, the sound of animals crying, the odour of sleeping bodies. Also, there is the noise of scratching outside, an indication of the demons from which she is protected. When the women wash her their hands move across the flesh of her body like shifts of clothing, caressing her skin. The water of the bath wraps itself around her. It surrounds her and oppresses her. She screams. It is a sound that comes from her belly. The hands caressing her hold her more tightly. She is drawn from the water like a dead animal, dripping onto the floor. The water that falls from her body takes with it the demons.

As time passes there begin to be nights when a man will come. When she is framed by the square of moonlight that comes through her window, illuminating her body, he will touch her. His hands are different. They search her body as if she were a landscape, as if there were secrets hidden within her body. There are places within her body that he finds, that feel more like water than like land. She imagines his hands touching her as if he were breaking the surface of her, as if she were a lake of water on a high plateau and he a mouth, tasting that water.

This is a new odour to her. It makes her nose wrinkle, as if tickled from the inside. It is a sweet rich odour that is pervasive. He is holding her hand. In his other hand is a wreath of flowers, whose heads are prickly. The other children have disappeared. First there were noises, chattering, an older voice which they have followed. Now there is only his hand.

The mud beneath her back is wet, yet sticks to her skin. Something hurts her inside, as if the lake of her body has been frozen over, is now broken, split open into shards of ice. Yet it is hot around her. Beads of sweat bite into her forehead. She screams, but this time the arms do not lift her from the water. A hand comes over her mouth, stifling her. The shards of ice bite into her flesh, the mud beneath her turning into glass, splitting open her back. Her hand is taken by his hand, made to follow the design of his body. She feels only its grip around her,

the hair of his chest, across which, like a road that has been dug through a forest, there runs a thin valley, a skin that is not skin, a dead skin.

If she breathes she will breathe water. Her nose and mouth are filled with the odour of the flowers. Her face is a canvas on which the plant's leaves have become pasted. She is blinded by a warm fluid that emerges from a gap in her head. This is the origin of a hurt that drugs her. Her limbs thrash out at the arm which holds her down, as if electrically, as if pierced with energy. Yet it is easier for her simply to breathe, to gasp brightness, to suck into her the demon water. Her waters run out over the banks of her lake, flooding her mind. His mouth drowns her.

Postface

Some would argue it was Flaubert who taught Maupaussant to write. The young oarsman who entered Flaubert's writing group, along with three others, met each week with Flaubert to discuss work that they had produced. Working under the French Master who had written *Madame Bovary*, as well as a keen sense of competitiveness with Flaubert's other students, may have motivated him further. It was in fact for one of these 'classes' that Maupaussant wrote *Boule de Suif.* Maupaussant was a gifted writer, but perhaps it can be accepted that Flaubert honed his skills. Gertrude Stein, too, could be said to have had a major influence on Hemingway's development of a unique, innovative prose style. Stein introduced Hemingway to Cezanne's art, which had a tremendous influence on his originality of style. She also edited and encouraged his early work to a degree not dissimilar to the way an academic supervisor would pilot the work of his students. Kafka's success, too, could to some degree be attributed to Max Brod's encouragement.

With the changing role of the intellectual in Western society over the past century, intellectual pursuit and philosophical debate have fallen, more than ever before, under the aegis of the University. The notion of tutelage of creative writing has long been in existence; only recently it has become more formalised within the frame of a University degree. Many of the world's best writers are to be found within the academic world, this context perhaps offering writers a more flexible working environment in terms of time and commitment, more closely aligned to their personal writerly pursuits, than occupations that the

private sector is able to offer. It is therefore not unnatural that an aspiring writer, one who would in no way wish to compare himself with those cited above, should pursue tutelage within the context of a Master's degree.

What makes one write? What motivates an individual to the distress of forcing oneself, in the early mornings, in the late evenings, while life goes on outside, to face a dull computer screen, or a blank page, in the effort to craft a story? For one reason or another, reasons I suspect that are closely aligned to the matter of the stories themselves, and the manner in which they are told, one chooses to become a writer. Alvarez's *The Savage God*, a nineteen-seventies treatise on the seemingly undeniable relationship between creative pursuit and depression-cum-suicide should perhaps be prescribed to any individual who makes this unwarranted decision. It is a pursuit which goes against the fibre of one's being, to sit and mull over a sentence, to spend hours editing the fat from a narrative, yet to miss on many occasions the right tone, the right voice. Nevertheless, for all of this, one still desires to complete the narrative, to finish the story. The value of encouragement and the input of an instructor or tutor can at times be immeasurable.

Perhaps more than anything else, it is one's reading of particular writers that acts as the strongest motivation for wishing to become a writer oneself. There are passages that are come across, ideas that are discovered, sentences that are found, in the great novels, that have the same effect on a reader as the epiphany that one hears so much about from the charasmatic religions. My own passage

through my sometimes eclectic, sometimes esoteric, reading – from science fiction, 'hard sf', in my teens to writers like Aldous Huxley, William Burroughs and George Orwell's *1984*, which brought me closer to some of the brilliant writers of the twentieth century, eventually lead to a preference for a particular genre or thematic system and a preference too for a particular kind of voice. Without attempting to be reductive I would probably place my own preferences closest to the literary grouping 'psychological realism'; but it is perhaps easier and less problematic to cite rather the writers whom I believe to have had the greatest influence on my work and, more profoundly, on my perception of the world.

I believe that the most important books of the last two centuries include Kafka's short stories, Camus's *The Outsider*, Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Notes from Underground*, Fitzgerald's unfinished novels, Hemingway's early work, and William Faulkner's short stories and novels. In the last fifty years I would include writers like Paul Bowles, Michael Ondaatje, Toni Morrison, William Trevor, Graham Greene, David Malouf, and Cormac McCarthy. I believe that each of these writers in one way or another has influenced my desire to write, as well as the prose style that I have begun to develop.

One of the critical realisations that I made concerning my own struggle with writing is that it is very easy and often quite dangerous to confuse the unique prose style of a text with the thematic content of that text which one believes

makes one wish to write. Although I love Cormac McCarthy's novels, I have realised that it is particularly his style, mostly in his later work, in which I am most interested. He seems to me to be one of the few true successors to Hemingway's perfection of the declarative sentence, the focus upon a deceptively simple diction, and his extreme use of conjunctives in multi-clausal sentences. The first thirty or forty pages of McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* are superb, to my mind quite innovative and powerfully original, though I would argue that the story itself is seriously flawed.

In Faulkner's work, on the other hand, I find the thematic drive more compelling than the prose style. Certain of his stories seem to hinge on the idea of a traumatic event around which the story circles, but which is rarely mentioned. ***The Sound and the Fury*** and a short story like 'The Bear' operate to some degree like puzzles, the reader being required to piece together disparate facts through the voices of disparate characters, in order to begin to understand what motivates the story, what is at the heart of it. This 'silence' of the implied author, to borrow a term from Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, should then be seen as a direct relationship between the manner in which the story is related and the theme upon which the story is based. The muddying of the past, in order to perhaps hide some terrifying truth, is paradoxically explored through the focalisation of characters who themselves are obsessed with the past. This notion of a suppressed past was to become one of the more consistent themes that runs through my own work. From Hemingway one can learn to be lean;

from Graham Greene one learns the powerful effect of a story constructed sometimes entirely around a single moral dilemna, the best example perhaps being *The Power and the Glory*; in David Malouf, one admires the beauty and integrity of a single perfectly constructed image.

How then does an aspiring writer investigate his or her own work for the source of the most important influences, and how does he or she determine whether the work is imitative or original? I do not think that it is an indignity to admit, certainly at the early stages of a hopeful career, that one's work is modelled on one particular writer or another. But there must arrive some point at which a break is made, one must pay one's temple taxes, acknowledge the origins, and then maintain and explore a new and original prose style. The themes that one chooses must be ideas that emerge out of one's own life, the great novels one has read simply providing a fresh lens, a new perspective, with which to observe that life. Surely it is these themes, emerging out of questions arising from one's own complex experience of life, that will eventually most significantly influence one's own voice.

This, anyway, was the theory. What was discovered, however, is that the primary concern is not in fact the anxiety of influence, but the amount of work that is involved. In 1898, at the time when Conrad was writing *Heart of Darkness*, he was great friends with Ford Madox Ford. They often met to discuss the work with which they were currently involved. It is recorded that a debate ensued concerning the last sentence of Conrad's novel: 'Nobody moved

for a time.' Ford argued that the use of the negative here made the phrase 'for a time' superfluous. Conrad, after much deliberation, and the construction of several drafts, finally disagreed. The intense deliberation, however, indicates the immense care with which Conrad and others at the time, emerging out of the tradition of Flaubert, took with regard to their work. Had you asked Flaubert on any particular day what he had done that day, he might easily have replied: editing a sentence – perfecting it.

I recall vividly the first session of the Honours Creative Writing class, that was offered in that year for the first time at the University of Cape Town. Without wishing to be negative, our instructor told our class, there were two things that had to be said: firstly, that this was not a class in which to express ourselves; and secondly, that we were expected to perform a minimum of twenty hours per week of work on our manuscripts. If this course constituted one quarter of our Honours degree for the semester, one student irately argued later on, then that would mean, according to these dictates, we should be spending eighty hours per week working; and that, he added, did not include time in class and travel time to and from University.

What one soon realised, however, was that this regimen of work was in fact entirely necessary. It became clear that it was only through this level of work that one was capable of producing material that was vaguely satisfying to oneself. The ideas that I had at that time always seemed to me on first thought to be workable and exciting. Yet, it was only through an attempt at the execution of

these ideas that their workability was tested. Often the idea would emerge on paper very differently to how I had first intended it; and often the idea did not work at all.

The novel that is presented in this text has undergone countless rewrites of its first third or half. The original idea is very different to the text that has emerged. Certain aspects have remained, for example the setting of a part of the novel in Mexico, certain phrases and sentences from the very first draft, the idea that some kind of murder should take place, and the notion that one of my main characters should feel and experience the world in an entirely alienated way. I do not believe, however, that the many thousands of words that I wrote, which I ultimately rejected, were of no use whatsoever. If I have learnt anything from the writing of this novel it is this: that the creative process itself is encapsulated within the writing process; that it is the physical process of sitting down, staring at a computer screen, or holding a pen over a piece of paper, concentrating on one thing only, the next sentence, which allows one access to one's unwritten story. One must sit and try to write before one can say what will emerge.

Paul Bowles in a documentary interview claims that when he sits down to write he has absolutely no idea what he will write about. This seems of course a little absurd, but the point he is making is valid. First he chooses a context, a physical place and time, and then he imagines a particular character within it, and then he begins writing. The story, the characterisation, the reason for his desire to write at all, will emerge during the process of writing. Naturally some

planning is necessary, particularly in the construction of a novel that is set in a very specific socio-political time-frame; but the kind of planning of the novel that I did when I first set out, including what would occur in each chapter, how each chapter would conclude, became relatively superfluous. I was only able to discover what my novel was about through the process of attempting to write it. I must then see those previous rejected drafts as stepping stones towards the reaching of the final draft. And perhaps this novel itself should not be regarded by me as nothing more than a further step towards the writing of a second novel. The argument goes: if one could describe one's work accurately enough, there would surely be no point in producing it. And if one knew precisely why one chose to write at all, perhaps there would no longer be a desire to write.

The original story was set entirely in Mexico, and had a lot to do with Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*. It depended to a large degree on the notion that Mexico could corrupt the Western spirit, producing a character who would look a lot like a kind of late-twentieth century Mr Kurtz. The idea was also a product of reading Camus's *The Outsider*, a book which had a profound affect upon this reader. I desired to contruct a character in the first-person who would narrate the story of his own impending madness and his subsequent violent actions. The idea was to create a character whose voice would have a consistency of integrity and logic, but would nevertheless be the voice of a violent, crazy person. The reader, in his or her desire to consume the narrative would then become complicit to the crimes for which the narrator is guilty, and

which he would narrate in almost a gratified manner. One would reach the end of the narrative having been surprised at what the voice has narrated, at the narrator's violent actions, but nothing would be illogical, or inconsistent with his way of perceiving the world. Perhaps one of the best examples of a highly successful novel that follows this kind of structure is Paul Bowles's *Let It Come Down*.

However, the drafts which I produced around this idea were not successful. They were over-descriptive, the character seemed absurdly lacking in vitality, there was no action. One of the problems was that I was overly concerned to inscribe in his narration a history that would justify his actions. The idea was to provide the reader with an anchor by which to understand the psychotic behaviour and thoughts of this particular character. Behind this notion lay the principle of cause and effect, that the abused becomes the abuser, that my character's violent sensibility should be read as a product of his childhood. I began to realise that the problems in the voice of this text arose out of an unbalancing of the overall tone of the first-person voice of this character, as clues to his past were insinuated into this voice. It simply did not seem to work when this kind of information was included, jarring as it did with my attempt to provide a tone of the intensity of the present moment to his narrative. If he was going to reminisce on the past, then he could not also sound like he was entirely rooted in his self-involved experience of the present moment. I began to realise that this problem was not necessarily indicative of my failure to construct his

history in a satisfactory manner, but rather it was a problem with my conception of character itself. It had never occurred to me, up to that point, that it may not be necessary to include any rationalising moments of this character's history in order for the character to sound consistent, believable or compelling. The problem, as I identified it, was one of assuming in the construction of a violent, psychotic character an implicit history of abuse – a relationship between the present and the past based on an epistomology of cause and effect. If I could conceive of a violent character, then perhaps, without attempting to justify him, the reader would believe in him.

I was only able to realise that the story that I was supposed to write involved several voices, after the failings of the texts with which I struggled. If, I surmised, I had another voice, another focaliser, through which the reader could gather information about the 'hero's' past, and which would provide a foil for his thoughts and actions, then perhaps the Mexican narrative would run more smoothly. At the time I had recently returned from a fascinating trip along the Agulhas Peninsula and had discovered the Moravian mission at Elim quite by chance. I was given a tour by a nurse; and somehow, over the next few weeks, in a manner whose processes I am unable to describe, came up with the idea that the second focaliser should be one who himself performs acts of violence and abuse, but who is more rooted in a particular, recognisable moral system. The idea of a director of Elim, one who would run a mission station on a desolate coast, who would devote his life to helping others, yet who at the same time

would perform sordid acts, would provide the ideal backdrop to my main protagonist.

Out of these ideas emerged another story, one whose focus becomes Elim itself, rather than Mexico, where the original narrative becomes the aftershock of the story told in South Africa. The title of the novel itself was changed from *The Tongue of Angels* to *Elim*. This structure allowed me to excise any passages that concerned the history of the protagonist of the Mexican narrative, for details that were pertinent could be contained within the more epistolary voice of the Elim narrative. The link between these two voices was structured around this history: the 'hero' of the novel who narrates the Mexican narrative had spent some time working at Elim. Perhaps the most significant structural choice was then made: that the story would be told chronologically 'backwards', for it was imperative to my project that the Mexican narrative be told before the imposition of a recognisable structure or morality. The third section was in fact an afterthought, the idea being to give the abused and murdered girl a kind of a voice. I had in mind Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, in which a voice is given to an illiterate slave, a woman whose existence comes to encapsulate the story of the passage of slaves across the Atlantic. How was I to write the voice of a girl who cannot speak, who is mentally handicapped? It was necessary here to make use of certain images, images of water in particular, that, without being conscious of it, had begun to become consistent throughout the novel.

Somewhere in the middle of this writing process I visited Mike Nicol, whom I greatly admired, at his home in Muizenburg. Ostensibly I was there concerning an idea I had had to start a commercial literary journal for the Southern African marketplace, something along the lines of *Granta*. The conversation, however, soon turned to the perpetual Damocles Sword which still hung over me, my novel. This is Mike Nicol on how to write a book. You need this much talent, he says, demonstrating a small gap between his thumb and forefinger, and you need to be this pig-headed, and then he shows a space between his hands that would fit a fisherman's twenty-pound cob. He tells me: be pig-headed, never give up. He tells me also that I will come to hate my pursuit of writing, that I will never be comfortable. It is not natural to sit on a Saturday afternoon, or a Sunday morning, or whenever, labouring over a sentence, a single step within the maze of an unwritten novel.

What I required then was a tremendous amount of work and an unflagging belief in the integrity of what I was attempting to do; a structure by which I would buffer my disappointments with a compulsion simply to soldier on. The chief discovery that was made was the following: that one makes it far easier on oneself if one works consistently, even if it is for only an hour a day. The second discovery was that a lack of inspiration is not an excuse for not writing: it is only through pig-headedly carrying on that one will reach the end. Walter Benjamin, in whose writing I at times found fuel for motivation, includes in *Reflections* an

essay titled 'Post No Bills: The Writer's Technique in Thirteen Theses'. The following points, or 'theses', seemed particularly pertinent:

> 7. Never stop writing because you have run out of ideas. Literary honour requires that one break off only at an appointed moment (a mealtime, a meeting) or at the end of work.
> 8. Fill the lacunae of inspiration by tidily copying out what is already written. Intuition will awaken in the process.
> 9. Nulla dies sine linea – but there may well be weeks.
> 10. Consider no work perfect over which you have not once sat from evening to broad daylight.

There were a few of these nights.